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Theory and Performance of Narrative Ambiguity in Selected Novels by John Hawkes.

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SELECTED NOVELS BY JOHN HAWKES

The Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical Col.

PH.D.

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THEORY AND PERFORMANCE OF NARRATIVE AMBIGUITY
IN SELECTED NOVELS BY JOHN HAWKES

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of Speech

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	ii
ABSTRACT	iv
INTRODUCTION	1
 CHAPTER	
I. SEMANTIC AND NARRATIVE AMBIGUITY	16
II. THE AESTHETIC VALUE OF AMBIGUITY	57
III. AMBIGUITY AND ORAL INTERPRETATION	77
IV. DEVICES OF NARRATIVE AMBIGUITY	108
V. THE PERFORMANCE OF NARRATIVE AMBIGUITY	160
VI. JOHN HAWKES: THE AMBIGUITY AND PERFORMANCE OF THREE EARLY NOVELS	173
VII. JOHN HAWKES: THE AMBIGUITY AND PERFORMANCE OF FOUR LATER NOVELS	228
CONCLUSION	264
BIBLIOGRAPHY	269
VITA	282

ABSTRACT

Narrative ambiguity, a concept which has only recently achieved prominence in literary criticism, has important implications for the performance of literature as well. Few studies exist which focus exclusively on narrative ambiguity. Most, instead, discuss the semantic kind. Recently, however, the increase of interest in the narrative form in general has precipitated interest in narrative ambiguity as well. In the field of the performance of literature, however, no one has investigated this phenomenon until now. The purpose of this study was to define and describe narrative ambiguity through an examination and identification of it both in theoretical writings and in selected novels of contemporary author John Hawkes in order to uncover implications for its performance.

Generally, ambiguity did not achieve status as a praiseworthy artistic device until 1930 and the publication of William Empson's Seven Types of Ambiguity in which he defined ambiguity generally as having more than one meaning. Unfortunately, this view of ambiguity has perpetuated a definition so general that it reduces the precision of critical terminology. Ambiguity is one type of multiple meaning unlike other effects such as irony and symbolism which are often confused with it. All multiple meanings depend on reader recognition and participation, but ambiguity differs from other multiple meaning effects in that it calls for two or more interpretations, but prevents the reader from choosing one as correct.

Although narrative ambiguity differs from the semantic kind delineated in Empson's book, similarities also exist and this study established the intimate relationship between the two. Semantic ambiguity arises only within words and word phrases. Narrative ambiguity, on the other hand, emanates at the structural level of the narrative form. Thus ambiguity in individual words may reinforce narrative ambiguity but cannot create it.

This study suggested classifying ambiguity as either conjunctive or disjunctive. When conjunctive ambiguity operates, two or more meanings arise and complement each other so that the reader need not choose between them. In disjunctive ambiguity, the two meanings mutually exclude each other but are equally tenable. Thus the reader cannot choose. As a result, disjunctive ambiguity is particularly suited to the narrative form and arises in many contemporary narratives, notably those of John Hawkes.

Ambiguity is sustained within a narrative in one of two ways. In many novels authored by Henry James and Herman Melville, opposing sets of clues each support the various interpretations. Study of John Hawkes's novels has revealed that the text can suggest two or more possible meanings without providing any supporting clues.

Traditionally, scholars have focused on ambiguity-creating devices such as incomplete reversals (or opposing clues which support the various interpretations), gaps (or informational omissions within the narrative), and verbally created ambiguities. Study of Hawkes's novels revealed other devices for creating ambiguity. In his early

novels, for instance, he uses devices such as stereotypic characters, commingling of dream and reality settings, and more significantly, the absence of supporting clues. In his later novels we see a refinement of these techniques as well as an increasing reliance on the first-person narrator whose reliability is suspect.

Clearly, ambiguity is an important literary device; therefore performers need to familiarize themselves with its workings in the narrative. This study identified general and specific ways in which solo and group performers can preserve, and in many cases, feature the ambiguity in Hawkes's novels so that readers may become more sensitive to narrative ambiguity in terms of its meaning, function, value, and relationship to performance.

INTRODUCTION

Narrative ambiguity, a concept which has only recently achieved prominence in literary criticism, has important implications for the performance of literature. The purpose of this study is to examine critically narrative ambiguity in order to identify it in individual texts and explore its relationship to and usefulness for interpretative reading theory and performance. Since the novels of John Hawkes provide ample illustrations of narrative ambiguity, the study will examine selected novels of this major contemporary writer to identify examples of narrative ambiguity and offer suggestions for realizing them in solo and group performance.

Historical Precedents

For centuries philosophers and scholars have regarded ambiguity with curious ambivalence. The device that one critic vehemently deplores and condemns another elevates to the pinnacle of reverence. What is this phenomenon that generates such diverse reactions, and why has it so long provoked dispute?

Although modern scholars regard ambiguity as a positive literary device, we can trace its perjorative connotations back to the ancients' view of it. Ancient authors generally discussed ambiguity in terms of its workings in real-life linguistic contexts and

simply disregarded its use in literature.¹ Because rhetoric dominated the interests of both Greek and Roman thinkers, they regarded ambiguity in language as a vice and urged young citizens to avoid it. For example, Aristotle in his Topica, De Sophisticis Elenchis, and the Rhetorica, and Quintilian in his Institutio Oratoria objected to the use of ambiguity in the language of politics, law, and science because of their demand for absolute clarity and precision in both written and oral forms. Aristotle, ever the logician, defined ambiguity as the degree of clearness or unclearness in language. Ideally, clearness would dominate, since it requires simplicity, precision, and economy of language, those qualities lauded by the great minds of philosophy. His discussion in De Sophisticis Elenchis provides a perceptive view of ambiguity as it relates to philosophical disputes. In it he argues that rhetorical ambiguity ultimately results in fallacious reasoning and sophistry. In short, Aristotle considers virtually all ambiguity in language as undesirable. Subsequent Greek and Roman thinkers added little to Aristotle's argument. Generally, personal taste influenced these additions and resulted in only slight variations on Aristotle's thought.

¹For an informative view of ambiguity in Greek literature, see William Bedell Stanford's volume, Ambiguity in Greek Literature: Studies in Theory and Practice. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1939), in which Stanford surveys the negative sense of ambiguity in Greco-Roman treatises and then shows how it operated as a positive rather than negative device in much of ancient Greek literature. Stanford, influenced by William Empson, contends that ambiguity in literature is good, and whether or not Greek and Roman rhetoricians rejected its use, remained a vital element of many of the greatest Greek works, notably Agamemnon and Oedipus Tyrannus.

Quintilian's discussion, for instance, agrees with Aristotle as he apparently summarizes the typical Roman attitude of intolerance toward ambiguity, intolerance justifiable as a result of its frequent abuse in courtroom litigation.

Because of widespread Aristotelean influence, a common but incorrect notion survives stipulating verbal ambiguity as solely the product of fifth century Sophistic design. Noted scholar William Stanford eradicates this notion by pointing to evidence which traces certain types of rhetorical ambiguity back to Heraclitus. Only later did Corax and Tisias, Gorgias, and Isocrates develop, refine, and in some cases exploit its use. And although in many cases these rhetoricians advanced valuable research regarding multiplicity of meaning in language, ambiguity fell prey to many of the more ambitious sophists who put their ability for equivocation to unscrupulous uses.² More often than not, unprincipled sophists exploited ambiguity in order to deceive and trick others less knowledgeable in the art.³ As a result, ambiguity took on pejorative connotations which have lingered into modern society's way of thinking.

Prior to the publication of William Empson's Seven Types of Ambiguity (1930), ambiguity denoted a situation in language use

²Stanford, p. 4.

³Stanford, p. 4.

in which it is impossible to decide between possible meanings, thus rendering the language unclear. Not until the publication of William Empson's landmark book did the concept of literary ambiguity gain prominence.⁴ His study of latent multiple meanings in the language of poetry popularized the term "ambiguity" and made it a respectable artistic device. Philosopher-scholar I. A. Richards summarizes this transition in thought by pointing out that, whereas "the old Rhetoric treated ambiguity as a fault in language, and hoped to confine or eliminate it, the new Rhetoric sees it as an inevitable consequence of the powers of language and as the indispensable means of most of our most important utterances."⁵

Unlike past scholars who characterized ambiguity as "a lack of clarity," Empson defines ambiguity broadly as "any verbal nuance, however slight, which gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language."⁶ He thus explains the concept in terms of the verbal responses an individual makes to a particular piece of language when asked for its meaning and the manner in which those responses affect the overall text in which the ambiguity occurs.

⁴He does not limit his discussion to poetry or even literature; the book, nevertheless, establishes ambiguity in literature as a positive artistic device.

⁵I.A. Richards, The Philosophy of Rhetoric (New York: Oxford University Press, 1936), p. 40.

⁶William Empson, Seven Types of Ambiguity (New York: New Directions, n.d.), p. 1.

His book illuminates the method of verbal analysis originated by critic Robert Graves. Empson elaborates on the communicative context within which ambiguity occurs by describing it as "an indecision as to what you mean, an intention to mean several things, a probability that one or other or both of two things has been meant, and the fact that a statement has several meanings."⁷ Here, he refocuses the thrust of ambiguity on authorial intention. His discussion grows out of what he calls the three "dimensions or scales" of ambiguity: "the degree of logical or grammatical disorder, the degree to which the apprehension of the ambiguity must be conscious, and the degree of psychological complexity concerned."⁸ Thus the text, the author, and the reader all play integral roles in his concept of ambiguity.

The first and simplest type of Empsonian ambiguity includes such seemingly disparate literary effects as mixed metaphor, dramatic irony, and antithesis.⁹ Empson's brilliant if oblique discussion proceeds through six other categories or "types" of ambiguities arranged hierarchically as to their complexity. Stanford summarizes Empson's seven-fold classification of ambiguities as follows:

1. The ambiguity of not knowing which of the vague associations of a word to hold most clearly in one's mind
2. Ambiguity when two or more meanings all add to the author's single meaning

⁷Empson, pp. 5-6.

⁸Empson, p. 48.

⁹Empson, pp. 23, 25, 43-44.

3. When two or more ideas are connected only by being both relevant in the present context and by the fact that they can be expressed simultaneously there in one word, e.g., Milton's "That specious monster, my accomplished snare" in which specious is used to connote in a single word Delilah's beauty and deceitfulness, and accomplished to suggest both talented and successful.

4. When two or more meanings do not agree among themselves or support one another, but combine to demonstrate a complicated and unsimplified state of mind in the author.

5. When the author is only discovering his idea in the act of writing, or else not holding it all in his mind at once, so that, for instance there is a simile which applies to nothing exactly but lies half way between two things while the author is moving from one to the other

6. When a statement says nothing, by tautology, by contradiction, or by irrelevant statements; here the reader is forced to invent clear statements of his own and they are liable to conflict with one another,

7. When the two meanings of a phrase are quite opposite, so that the effect is to show a fundamental division in the writer's mind.¹⁰

Undeniably, Empson's pioneer book established ambiguity as a positive rather than negative device of poetry. He adamantly asserts that all good poetry should be ambiguous: "the machinations of ambiguity are among the very roots of poetry"¹¹ because it offers "language . . . rich in implications."¹² Certainly, his method of verbal analysis will remain a vital part of literary criticism

¹⁰I have quoted from Stanford, pp. 92-93 because his condensation seems one of the most lucid.

¹¹Empson, p. 3.

¹²Empson, p. 5.

because it has done so much to enlarge the reader's understanding of poetry by teaching him to find more complex meanings. No one can deny that his discoveries about ambiguities, both syntactic and semantic, have been enormously influential. Nevertheless, we cannot overlook certain valid criticisms of his method. William Van O'Connor, for example, considers Empson's approach to poetry analysis potentially weak because it invites "overly complicated, ingenious, and finally irrelevant readings."¹³ Consequently, when a reader abuses this method of analysis by "over-reading," the poem itself, says M.H. Abrams, may vanish in "overdrawn and sometimes self-contradictory explanations that violate the norms of the English language and ignore the controls upon reference exerted by the context of a literary passage."¹⁴

A major criticism has arisen over Empson's insistence on seven "types" of ambiguities. Ever since the book's appearance, readers have criticized his use of seven as being unnecessary and mistaken¹⁵ and as a result, misleading and reductive. Aesthetician Monroe Beardsley points out that Empson's attempt to classify all

¹³William Van O'Connor, "Ambiguity," Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics, enl., eds. Alex Preminger et al., (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), p. 19.

¹⁴M.H. Abrams, A Glossary of Literary Terms, 3d ed., (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), p. 9.

¹⁵Van O'Connor, p. 19.

the nuances of ambiguity into seven categories breaks down because no one could follow the distinctions.¹⁶

Another typical criticism leveled at Empson concerns his imprecise use of the term "ambiguity," a problem that continues to plague modern critical terminology. Empson himself admitted in the preface that he had used "the term 'ambiguity' to mean anything . . . [he] liked,"¹⁷ and, more often than not, he used the term in widely varied senses, rendering his discussion obscure and difficult to follow. Worse still, Empson's insistence on using "ambiguity" as a catch-all phrase has fostered a tradition of using the term in a broad, generalized manner which not only causes confusion but also diminishes the functional precision of critical terminology. At present in popular usage, the term "ambiguity" (generally meaning "having more than one meaning") is an umbrella-term for many different kinds of literary effects, which more careful scholars and literary critics distinguish as "polysemous," "soft focus," "plurivocality," "multiple meaning," and "depth symbol." Further, some people characterize literature as ambiguous when in reality they mean vague, symbolic, or ironic. We need a clarification of this term in order to deal with it in critical theory, silent reading, and performance. By understanding how ambiguity differs from effects

¹⁶Monroe C. Beardsley, Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1958), p. 151.

¹⁷Empson, p. viii.

frequently confused with it, we may gain greater insight into its unique effects, especially in performance of literature.

In modern criticism we may classify the senses of "ambiguity" into two major types: conjunctive and disjunctive.¹⁸ Linguistically, conjunctive ambiguity refers to the emergence of simultaneous multiple clusters of meanings being at once controlled by and controlling the overall context of the literary work. Thus we cannot speak accurately of the meaning of a word, but can point only to a range of appropriate meanings. Disjunctive ambiguity, on the other hand, arises when distinctly separate meanings function as mutually exclusive alternatives. The defining feature of disjunctive ambiguity is equivocal construction which calls for two or more interpretations each of which excludes the other.¹⁹

Both types of ambiguity are significant according to artists and critics who defend ambiguity as producing a variety of positive aesthetic effects. Both kinds of ambiguity force the reader to search for clues which will clear up the ambiguity, and as a result, the reading process becomes dynamic and precludes the passive reader who merely consumes the work, since the very nature of ambiguity engages him in a collaborative process of filling in the gaps of information. And in this sense the reader shares in the creation

¹⁸Abraham Kaplan and Ernst Kris, "Esthetic Ambiguity," Philosophy and Phenomenological Research 8 (March 1948): 416. Not all critics use this breakdown scheme, but for the purposes of this study, it seems to work best.

¹⁹Kaplan and Kris, pp. 416-17.

of the selection.²⁰ This same process can operate within the audience situation if the performer leaves intact the various clues positing conjunctive and disjunctive ambiguities. Therefore these concepts of ambiguity deserve the attention of the scholar and performer.

Modern criticism also distinguishes narrative ambiguity from semantic ambiguity. Whereas semantic ambiguity arises only within language units, narrative ambiguity, the subject of this study, emerges within the structure of the literary form. In other words, semantic ambiguity is restricted to language, but narrative ambiguity comes about within larger units of the literary form, notably plot, character, setting, and point of view. Ambiguities frequently occur in plots where we cannot make a determinate interpretation of the nature of an action. For example, Guy de Maupassant's short story "Little Soldier" offers an example of disjunctive ambiguity where a young boy dies by falling from a bridge. The action itself remains unclear, as we cannot discern whether it is accidental or intentional. Similarly, a character's motives for an action may defy interpretation. But ambiguity arises in places other than plot and character. Often point of view fosters disjunctive and conjunctive ambiguities where specific clues corroborate two or more versions of an event. For instance, distance between the time of an event and remembrance of it can result in inaccuracy in its report with any but an omniscient narrator.

²⁰Shlomith Rimmon, The Concept of Ambiguity--the Example of James (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), p. 229.

As a result, we may not know which version to believe. Bias on the part of a narrator may likewise account for unreliability which fosters two opposing sets of clues. Frequently, a shift in point of view serves as the source of sequential ambiguity because several characters exist simultaneously with whom we can identify.²¹ Potential unreliability, especially, can intensify ambiguity. In John Hawkes's Travesty, for example, the central ambiguity rests upon our view of the speaker's reliability as a narrator.

Clearly, narrative ambiguity prevails as a central device of much of today's literature, and, as scholars and performers, we must concern ourselves with it. Typically, modern narrative fiction abounds with ambiguity. John Hawkes, one American who writes out of the belief that "chaos rather than order dominates day to day living," reflects a sense of "fractured life"²² in his novels. Not surprisingly, his books abound with ambiguities, and, therefore, they provide fruitful sources for study. Further, Hawkes's novels contain a slightly different type of narrative ambiguity, one apparently ignored in scholarly discussion until now. This kind of ambiguity arises when enough clues exist to suggest multiple interpretations but the paucity of evidence (as opposed to equal evidence to support more than one possibility) renders choice impossible. Although ambiguity of this sort frequently occurs in such dramatic works as

²¹Rimmon, p. 39.

²²Donald J. Greiner, Comic Terror: The Novels of John Hawkes (Memphis: Memphis State University Press, 1973), p. xi.

those by Pinter and Ionesco (in fact, in many dramas of the Absurdist school), it has not been explored fully in prose fiction. We can thus profit by an examination of his works because he frequently employs this type of ambiguity.

Narrative Ambiguity and Performance

When we realize that ambiguity plays a large role in rendering a literary text dynamic and that cooperative interaction between the text and reader is so important, we can begin to understand elements involved in performing ambiguous prose fiction. Performance of ambiguous narratives, whether group or solo, can illuminate, underscore and in many cases feature the ambiguity in ways that the silent reading cannot. This does not imply that performance is better; it is only another way of delving into the text in order to arrive at a better understanding of it. But just as the sophisticated silent reader can experience the effects of ambiguity because of his awareness of it, so, too, can the skilled or aware performer preserve and feature the ambiguity as well as its effects in a well conceived and executed performance. Artistic ambiguity is undeniably valuable and its inclusion in literature is intentional. However, if a performer fails to recognize it within a narrative, then his performance will invariably fail to feature it. Because ambiguity in part depends upon reader recognition, implications arise as to its role in performance. Unless the performer makes his audience aware of the workings of ambiguity

within a narrative, the performance invalidates the effects of that artistic device, and his performance disambiguates the literature.

But what of the performer who, like some readers, through overzealousness willfully ambiguates literature which is not truly ambiguous? This undoubtedly can and does happen when readers become over eager in their searchings for multiple meanings within any given text. Here again, the interpreter's performance may well negate the literary selection itself. Always we come back to the omnipresent rule of performance, that the performer must remain true to the literature. If ambiguity plays a part in the literature, then performance must reflect it. And if a selection contains no ambiguity, the performance must not superimpose multiple meanings upon it.

The Problem

This study is a critical examination and description of the concept of narrative ambiguity in order to identify it in specific works and illuminate its relationship to and import for oral performance. In an attempt to clarify the theoretical findings I will then examine the major novels of John Hawkes in order to discover the ambiguities and see how they function in terms of performance. I will investigate semantic ambiguity only as it provides a foundation for a proper understanding of narrative ambiguity. The study seeks to answer the questions: (1) What is narrative ambiguity? (2) How do scholars in the field of oral performance of literature interpret the concept of narrative ambiguity? (3) How does this interpretation

compare with its more familiar interpretation delineated by literary critics? (4) What implications does narrative ambiguity have for theory of performance of literature? (5) How do the works of John Hawkes offer examples of these concepts in terms of applied criticism and performance?

Sources

Sources for the study include available dissertations, theses, journal articles, and scholarly writings which discuss narrative ambiguity by writers in the fields of oral interpretation and literary criticism. Supplementary sources include writings on ambiguity and narrative structure in any allied fields such as aesthetics and psychology that I could locate through indices, bibliographies, and reference books. Other sources include the novels of John Hawkes and available critical commentary upon them.

Contributory Studies

To date only two major studies exist that focus on the concept of narrative ambiguity. In The Concept of Ambiguity--the Example of James (1977), Shlomith Rimmon theoretically examines disjunctive ambiguity and applies it to four works by Henry James. Few works other than those by James are included, and Rimmon does not consider conjunctive ambiguity in detail, nor does she apply the concept to the performance of literature. One other study, by Ralf Norrman,²³

²³Ralf Norrman, "Techniques of Ambiguity in the Fiction of Henry James," Acta Academiae Aboensis, Humaniora, ser. A, 54 (1977): 1-197.

examines devices of ambiguity as they appear in the works of Henry James. No studies to date explore John Hawkes's body of narrative fiction as a source of ambiguity, nor have I uncovered any study which focuses on the performance of narrative ambiguity.

Organization

The first chapter of this study examines semantic and narrative ambiguities as linguists and literary critics perceive them. Chapter II considers the practical and aesthetic values of ambiguity in literature. The third chapter considers narrative ambiguity in the field of oral interpretation. Chapter IV focuses on devices of narrative ambiguity. Chapter V examines the performance of narrative ambiguity. The final two chapters identify ambiguity in the early and later works of John Hawkes and suggest ways performance can illuminate the ambiguity. The conclusion presents a summary of the findings and a general reconsideration of the performance of narrative ambiguity.

CHAPTER I

SEMANTIC AND NARRATIVE AMBIGUITY

Obviously, a great deal of reciprocity exists between the semantic and narrative functions of ambiguity.¹ Although this study deals with narrative ambiguity, a fuller understanding of semantic ambiguity is necessary background. The works of certain major scholars can provide this necessary information; Shlomith Rimmon, Philip Wheelwright, Monroe Beardsley, and Abraham Kaplan and Ernst Kris.² The next section of this chapter will examine more closely semantic ambiguity as scholars generally perceive it, potential problems arising from its broadly conceived foundation, and effects often confused with it such as irony, vagueness, and symbolism. The chapter will finally focus on specific differences between semantic and narrative ambiguity.

Semantic Ambiguity

The American Heritage Dictionary defines "ambiguous" as "susceptible of multiple interpretation" and "doubtful or uncertain."

¹I use the terms "verbal," "linguistic," and "semantic" interchangeably. "Narrative," used in conjunction with ambiguity, denotes a separate function.

²Shlomith Rimmon, The Concept of Ambiguity--the Example of James. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1977); Philip Wheelwright, The Burning Fountain: A Study in the Language of Symbolism. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968); Abraham Kaplan and Ernst Kris, "Esthetic Ambiguity," Philosophy and Phenomenological Research 8 (March 1948): 415-35; Monroe C. Beardsley, Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism. (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1958).

Noted linguist J.G. Kooij suggests that ambiguity in everyday usage refers to the property of words and sentences which allows individuals to interpret them in a multiplicity of senses because insufficient clues exist which might clarify the meaning.³ As a result, we have come to equate the term with a lack of clarity, and the pejorative connotations originally attached to ambiguity by the ancients have continued in linguistic thought. Not surprisingly, linguists like Kooij, regard ambiguity as a ubiquitous and unavoidable deficiency in natural language. We see semantic ambiguity operating in words such as "ball," "pipe," and "walk," and in a sentence such as "They are walking dogs," all of which have two or more distinct meanings out of context. "They are walking dogs," may connote a group of dogs walking, where the word "walking" functions as an adjective, or a group of people who are taking their dogs for exercise, where "walking" functions as a verb. Linguist Jerrold Katz designates this phenomenon as "multiplicity of senses versus uniqueness of sense,"⁴ and the effect depends upon a lack of clarifying clues. Frequently, ambiguity arises in spoken, but not written language, as seen in Belloc's brief poem: "When I am dead, I hope it may be said:/ 'His sins were scarlet, but his books were read.'" Here, we cannot fully appreciate the total

³J.G. Kooij, Ambiguity in Natural Language (Amsterdam: North Holland Publishing Company, 1971), p. 1.

⁴Jerrold J. Katz, Semantic Theory (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), p. 5.

flavor of the delightful pun on the words "red," "scarlet," and "read," unless we actually hear the lines oralized. Moreover, the writing of the homonym negates its ambiguity.

From these examples we can see that what the linguist calls "ambiguity," "polysemy," or mere "vagueness" differs vastly from what Empson refers to as "types of ambiguity." Whereas Empson's typology arises from the point of view of the communicative effects and their resulting contribution to the general textual structure of a poem,⁵ the linguist's concept of ambiguity arises only in terms of human response to verbal clues.

Psycholinguists have researched the phenomenon in order to delineate hypotheses which explain how people respond to ambiguity. Two such theories explain ambiguity in terms of psychological responses wherein listeners proceed through a sentence and compute only one interpretation for each ambiguous construction ("The Garden Path Theory") and wherein arising ambiguities influence listeners to choose one specific interpretation by the end of a clause ("The Many Meanings Theory").⁶ Most linguists agree, however, that the best theory of ambiguity, called "The Mixed Theory," explains the psychological processes as a combination of the two preceding theories. This hypothesis states that when listeners encounter ambiguity, they

⁵Kooij, pp. 122-23.

⁶Herbert H. Clark and Eve V. Clark, Psychology and Language: An Introduction to Psycholinguistics (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977), pp. 80-82.

automatically allow several possible interpretations because language is naturally ambiguous. Contextual clues then guide them in compiling information which allows them to select one meaning as "correct." If, however, the ambiguity is apparently unresolvable, they compensate by arbitrarily selecting one meaning. But if later contextual information contradicts the initial chosen interpretation, they will then try to integrate this new information and compute a newly compatible interpretation.⁷

Such theories provide only minimal help for the unsophisticated layman in understanding the dynamic process of reading an ambiguous word or phrase. Scholars outside the field of linguistics have attempted to isolate and explain factors relating to ambiguity, especially as it functions in literature.

Generally, literary critics discuss ambiguity in terms of multiple meanings, since ambiguity is always a matter of possible choices and not mere vagueness. Critics further discuss ambiguity in terms of multiple meanings each of which is equally supported by different sets of clues within the literature. We will see that another possibility for this literary device exists, one in which ambiguity also arises when no clues within the literature support any of the various meanings, yet the multiple possibilities undoubtedly exist. Ambiguity achieved by this method functions in the same manner that semantic ambiguity operates as linguists describe

⁷Clark and Clark, p. 82.

it. Thus we have a kind of dichotomy in which literary ambiguity (generally referring to one type of multiple meaning effect) may arise and derive support from many clues or no clues. However, we must first realize that something within the literature must suggest more than one possible meaning.⁸

This dichotomy recalls the American Heritage definition of "ambiguous" and points up an important aspect of the effect. Ambiguity, as we shall see, operates in both language and literature in which one of two things occurs as a result of interaction between the text and reader. First, ambiguity may provoke uncertainty of some kind because of contradictory clues which give rise to more than one meaning. Or ambiguity may cause doubt within the reader because no clues exist which will positively clarify any meaning as "correct." Thus ambiguity arises because clues are equivocal or because no clues exist. The idea of uncertainty is undoubtedly familiar to most readers. If we are asked to specify whether "walk" is a noun or verb we must answer "It is ambiguous," because no contextual clues exist which would give rise to clarification. Uncertainty which arises in this manner may not present as many obstacles to our understanding as does uncertainty which emanates from multiple meanings growing out of contradictory clues. However, just the opposite may be equally true. We will see by examining the novels of John Hawkes that some of the ambiguities arise as a result of no

⁸I will discuss the ways in which the various interpretations arise in detail in Chapter IV.

clues existing which support the different possible meanings. His books in many instances seem impenetrable because they contain ambiguity, but then offer no clues for choosing between the two or more choices. For example in The Blood Oranges a major character dies by hanging. The text suggests that the hanging is either accidental or suicidal. We know that the two possibilities mutually exclude each other, and yet the narrative framework suggests both. We further realize that no further clues exist which corroborate either possibility as being correct. The impasse remains and we have no way of making a choice.

Notice that purposeful ambiguity is not synonymous with not knowing. Ambiguity must involve a reader awareness of more than one possible interpretation and an inability to choose one of them as "correct." This device would, then, not include not knowing what happens to the characters after the story ends. The latter would be a simple lack of information, one which does not suggest two or more possible alternatives. In order for ambiguity to operate, we must have more than a lack of information; we must also see clearly that alternatives operate within the language or literature. Only when two or more possible meanings clearly emerge will artistic ambiguity operate. It may be that opposing sets of clues support the ambiguity (such as the works of Henry James exemplify) or it may be that the text creates the ambiguity by not offering evidence to support any of the possible meanings (as in the case of some of John Hawkes's works).

We can discuss ambiguity, then, as one type of multiple meaning. But we must be careful not to assume that all multiple meaning

effects and ambiguity are synonymous. "Multiple meaning" as defined by Monroe Beardsley, for instance, refers to discourse which contains both primary and secondary levels of meaning.⁹ These multiple meanings may arise by the use of well-known literary devices such as metaphor, ironic suggestion, symbolism, and double-entendre.

Beardsley, like others, objects to using "ambiguity" as a strict equivalent of "multiple meaning." Instead, he reserves the term for "linguistic expressions that are doubtful in meaning because they could have either, but not both, of two possible meanings,"¹⁰ with no provisions for choosing between them. Generally designating ambiguity as "multiple meaning" radically differs from Beardsley's definition, since many effects dependent upon multiple meanings call for no choice, and the various secondary meanings may neither mutually exclude each other nor function incorrectly.

These obvious disagreements over the "proper" meaning of ambiguity point to another dichotomy in modern critical terminology. Following Kaplan and Kris, we can classify the senses of "ambiguity" into two major types, conjunctive and disjunctive. Kaplan and Kris offer an excellent clarification of these terms. When considered with Shlomith Rimmon's study of disjunctive ambiguity, their discussion offers a fairly solid view of ambiguity. We must realize, however, that because each critic uses these terms in an individualized

⁹Beardsley, p. 126.

¹⁰Beardsley, p. 126; see also Rimmon, p. 10.

manner, we must not only clarify their peculiar meanings but finally operationally define each term as it seems best suited for integration into the total framework of this study. The following discussion is a description-analysis of the current terminology of conjunctive and disjunctive ambiguities based on the discussion by Kaplan and Kris¹¹ followed by a brief explanation of how their classification system differs from those of other major critics.

Kaplan and Kris define ambiguity generally as a particular characteristic of language wherein all words exhibit multiple clusters of meanings (p. 416). However, they quickly note that the term ambiguity "is usually given a narrower reference, being in fact restricted to one or perhaps two . . . types of ambiguity . . . (disjunctive and . . . also conjunctive ambiguity)" (p. 416). Though they begin by recognizing this limitation, they ultimately group "ambiguity" into five major categories: integrative, additive, projective, conjunctive, and disjunctive (pp. 416-20). However, we will see that in actuality two types (additive and integrative) are more precisely types of plurisignation (or a conjunctive effect described by Philip Wheelwright) and that projective ambiguity is reader subjectivity and not ambiguity at all. They go on to say:

A word to which the responses are diffused--
i.e., not grouped in sharply distinct clusters
--is often described as "vague"; and a word
evoking multiple clusters simultaneously is
sometimes said to signify unambiguously a

¹¹All otherwise unidentified page numbers refer to the Kaplan and Kris article.

"complex" meaning rather than to be ambiguous. (These cases roughly correspond to what we shall call . . . additive and integrative ambiguities, respectively.) . . . these various characteristics of language can be treated as generically identical. In comprising them all under the concept of ambiguity, we have reference, not necessarily to uncertainty of meaning, but to its multiplicity. Thus conceived, ambiguity is not a disease of language but an aspect of its life-process--a necessary consequence of its adaptability to varied contexts (pp. 416-17).

They thus begin with the assumption that there is a generalized, "archetypal" ambiguity and that a continuum exists encompassing individual types of ambiguities generally distinguished by the peculiar forms of discourse within which they occur. This statement once again points up the fact that uncertainty is not necessarily the same effect as multiplicity of language. Certainly, the two effects relate, but because of the ancient stigma attached to uncertainty or lack of clearness, it seems that Kaplan and Kris, like others, have approached the concept of ambiguity in terms of multiple meanings in order to exorcise the pejorative connotations so long associated with it. I contend that unintentional ambiguity may be "a disease of language" in some instances; in others, notably literature, purposeful ambiguity can be a valuable artistic tool.

Conjunctive Ambiguity

Linguistically, conjunctive ambiguity refers to the emergence of simultaneous clusters of meanings being at once controlled by and controlling the overall context of the sentence. The meanings remain distinct yet connected as they support rather than contradict each other. We cannot speak accurately of the meaning of a word,

then, but can point only to a range of appropriate meanings.¹²

Kaplan and Kris define ambiguity as conjunctive when "separate meanings are jointly effective in the interpretation. [The meanings differ, yet do not mutually exclude each other.] Rather than overlapping of clusters, there is but a single cluster . . . [whose] meanings, . . . are . . . responded to conjointly" (p. 419). Other scholars have discussed conjunctive effects under different labels.

Plurisignation

Many conjunctive effects fall within the broader category of what Philip Wheelwright designates as "plurisignation." Also labeled "double meaning" and "complexity," by Shlomith Rimmon, these expressive symbols carry more than one legitimate reference or connotation. Wheelwright and others discuss this verbal phenomenon especially as it functions as an integral part of poetry.¹³ Good poetry, Wheelwright maintains, strives for semantic richness and thus employs words whose "intended meanings are likely to be more or less multiple, yet so fused as to produce an integral meaning which radically transcends the sum of the ingredient meanings, and hence which defies any adequate analysis into monosignative

¹²Kaplan and Kris, p. 416. However, they say this is true of all words in which any kind of multiple meaning operates,

¹³See, for instance, Cleanth Brooks, The Well-Wrought Urn, 1947, although he uses the term irony and not ambiguity.

components."¹⁴ Wheelwright is quick to point out that the multiple meanings of a given plurisign are not necessarily all the possible meanings. The poem's total meaning involves "tension between two or more directions of semantic stress."¹⁵ For example, a poem may contain words which simultaneously evoke modern meanings and ancient mythological ones all of which correctly function within the context of the poem. In Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Work Without Hope," the lines, "Yet well I ken the banks where amaranths blow,/ Have traced the fount whence streams of nectar flow," use the words "amaranths" and "nectar," which may correctly call to mind images of lush, paradisiacal beauty. Similarly, though, these plurisigns may evoke mythological connotations of eternity ("amaranths" being the flower whose blooms never perish) and godlikeness ("nectar" being the traditional drink of the gods in Greek and Roman mythology). Considered together, these plurisigns and their connotations evoke an aura of mythological beauty blemished by the sadness of the mortals they describe.

Although Wheelwright coined the term "plurisignation," others have taken the term and altered its strict meaning. Rimmon, for example, equates conjunctive effects, multiple meanings, complexity, double meaning, and plurisignation; however, she stipulates that none

¹⁴Philip Wheelwright, "Semantics and Poetry," Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics, enl., eds, Alex Preminger et al., (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1974), p. 760.

¹⁵Wheelwright, Burning Fountain, p. 81.

of these effects reduces their various meanings to one underlying one. Instead, she asserts, these meanings maintain their distinctness and operate conjointly, unfused and separated.¹⁶ For her, then, plurisignation is closer to conjunctive ambiguity as defined by Kaplan and Kris because the meanings remain separate yet connected. But for Wheelwright, plurisignation differs from that definition of conjunctive ambiguity. This basic difference between her uses of the term and Wheelwright's apparently stems from her background in logic which employs the term "conjoin" in a specialized manner.

Kaplan and Kris locate conjunctive ambiguity somewhere between Rimmon's description and Wheelwright's description of plurisignation. The reader must recognize two or more distinct meanings, but eventually respond to them conjointly. Kaplan and Kris remind us that our understanding of irony operates in this way, though it is not ambiguity (p. 419). Apparently, then, the use of the words "conjunctive" and "conjoin" varies depending upon the user. For Rimmon "conjunctive" does not mean a joining together into a unified whole, but rather a juxtapositioning of two or more alternatives which retain their unique individuality and identity. For Kaplan and Kris, on the other hand, "conjoin" apparently indicates a recognition of two or more meanings that eventually allow us to respond to the overall meaning in a unified, integrated manner. For them, it does not matter whether or not the individual meanings join and lose their identity

¹⁶Rimmon, p. 21. Notice, too, that she acknowledges that some conjunctive effects may reduce their parts to wholes.

(though they later stipulate that the meanings do remain distinct, but connected). Our responses to these separate elements is the key. Wheelwright goes further in asserting that in plurisignation, the individual elements themselves disappear, becoming one with the other. According to Wheelwright, we can no longer identify the various elements that go into the composition of the overall meanings. For Kaplan and Kris, however, the distinct elements remain separable, but connected, whereas for Rimmon, the elements co-exist but never conjoin at a higher level. For our purposes "conjunctive ambiguity" will refer to a general category including cases in which the meanings maintain their distinctiveness and cases in which they join. Thus, in our view, "plurisignation" is really one kind of conjunctive effect. Whatever the differences in perspective, plurisignation does function as a type of multiple meaning, one quite similar to conjunctive ambiguity.

Disjunctive Ambiguity

Disjunctive ambiguity arises when distinctly separate meanings function as mutually exclusive alternatives.¹⁷ The defining feature of disjunctive ambiguity is its equivocal construction which calls for two or more interpretations each of which excludes the other. Because the ambiguity depends on equivocal construction, as Kaplan

¹⁷Kaplan and Kris, p. 417; see also Beardsley, p. 126 and Rimmon, p. 10. Note, too, that Beardsley, Rimmon, and Wheelwright regard disjunctive ambiguity as the only "true" kind.

and Kris point out, we may interpret "The Duke yet lives that Henry shall depose" in two ways, but each interpretation excludes the other (p. 417). Rimmon has gone on to expand this discussion in her book, The Concept of Ambiguity--the Example of James (1977). In this penetrating work, she divides the study into two parts, the first a theoretical approach to disjunctive ambiguity in which she delimits and examines the concept and describes the ways in which it operates at the level of narrative structure, and second, a practical application of this descriptive tool to an analysis of four works by Henry James.

Rimmon has pulled from art an example which helps to clarify the concept of disjunctive ambiguity further. The well-known drawing of the rabbit and the duck is a visual representation of this quality which also occurs in language and literature. In the drawing, an individual views either the rabbit or the duck but not both simultaneously, so that the picture remains a curious stalemate in which the figures alternate incessantly. We could compare conjunctive ambiguity in Wheelwright's sense to a picture of a griffin in which the eagle and the lion together create the animal. When we see the picture we do not perceive either the eagle or the lion, but both together conjoined as the griffin. This stalemate situation in disjunctive ambiguity is the key to understanding it in both language and literature, for disjunctive ambiguity creates an impasse wherein the reader cannot hold both interpretations at once, though he realizes that no clues exist which allow him to choose one interpretation over the other. Thus the unresolvable ambiguity forces him to

vacillate continuously between the two contradictory readings. In explaining the rabbit-duck drawing and other visual ambiguities, aesthetician E. H. Gombrich points out that the artist creates such ambiguity by omitting unequivocal information and including conflicting clues.¹⁸ In this same way, the writer creates one type of literary ambiguity. For Rimmon, then, disjunctive ambiguity is in fact a "conjunction" of exclusive disjuncts¹⁹ that can never be resolved or unified into a single interpretation. In literature this type of ambiguity warrants choice but renders it impossible.²⁰ Her definition prohibits the possibility of plurivocality, for only when confronted with equally tenable, though incompatible, alternatives do we have what Rimmon calls disjunctive ambiguity. Radically opposing plurisignation or conjunctive theories which offer combined meanings that complement each other or conjoin at a higher level to resolve the seeming ambiguity, her definition restricts ambiguity to a "double system of mutually exclusive clues."²¹ By defining ambiguity in this manner, she eliminates the possibility that

¹⁸E. H. Gombrich, Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation, 3d ed., (London: Phaidon Press, 1968), pp. 222, 238-42, and 260. Examine also M.C. Escher's Night and Day.

¹⁹Rimmon, p. 27.

²⁰Beardsley, however, points out that in language, an ambiguous word or statement may often be rendered lucid within the context so that we need not choose.

²¹Rimmon, p. 12.

the source is in the reader and is therefore related to that taboo of New Criticism, the Affective Fallacy.²² Instead, the text and not the reader's psyche contains the ambiguity. Similarly, its defining properties eliminate the sometimes derogatory sense of vagueness as an integral part of ambiguity, since we characterize vagueness by "hovering" rather than distinct and mutually exclusive possibilities.²³

Disjunctive ambiguity, then, is one effect that we can perceive in language as well as in literature. In literature it presents complex and unique challenges to the reader which we will discuss in the next chapter.

In summary, we can find support for a general definition of ambiguity neither as narrow as Rimmon's nor as generalized as other scholars have suggested. We can justifiably consider ambiguity as a classification of effects which can be thought of as a subset of multiple meaning including conjunctive and disjunctive effects. Conjunctive ambiguity refers to two or more meanings which are not mutually exclusive and which may or may not join at a higher level. Disjunctive ambiguity, on the other hand, refers to two or more meanings which are equally tenable but mutually exclusive. The ambiguity must involve two or more meanings but the development of the ambiguity may differ as to whether or not clues exist within

²²This is not to suggest that the reader plays no role in the creation of ambiguity, as we shall examine in Chapter II.

²³Rimmon, p. 20.

the literature to support the possible meanings. In other words, we may classify ambiguity as an effect pointing to doubt or uncertainty, because many clues or no clues are provided which might clarify the exact meaning. This latter nuance of ambiguity is strongly suggested by some of the novels of John Hawkes, which are full of instances where two or more possibilities emerge, yet no clues support any interpretation.

Effects Often Interchanged With Ambiguity

Because many people treat cognate verbal phenomena such as irony and symbolism as interchangeable with ambiguity in the sense of "having more than one meaning," the functional precision of the critical terminology diminishes, since cognate phenomena provoke different effects and responses than does ambiguity. Keeping in mind the fundamental distinction between conjunctive and disjunctive ambiguities, and whether the ambiguity arises because of no clues or because of conflicting clues, we may profit by differentiating these types of "ambiguity-proper"²⁴ from their various cognate counterparts. By examining these cognates, we may come to understand how each differs from truly ambiguous effects.

Subjective readings

We often confuse reader subjectivity with ambiguity-proper, although it more precisely refers to those responses and aspects

²⁴I have adapted this term from Rimmon.

of the aesthetic process that each individual reader brings to the verbal structure. Certain immediate life experiences may affect a reader's responses to a particular word or sentence, provoking what appear to be "multiple meanings," but are in fact responses located in the reader and not in the verbal structure.²⁵ For example, a reader recently bereaved of a spouse may derive connotations of death from a sentence containing the word "black," although linguistic norms deny this as a legitimate interpretation. In this way, the individual "reads into" the word an incorrect meaning, one operative only for him at that particular moment. I.A. Richards in discussing poetry has aptly labeled one aspect of reader subjectivity as mnemonic irrelevancies.²⁶ These "intrusions," as he calls them, result from the reader's personal reminders of past reverberations or erratic associations which in all likelihood have nothing to do with the word or phrase. Though misleading, they remain powerful and pervasive effects in the literary experience.

Kaplan and Kris identify this same phenomenon as a type of ambiguity they call "projective" (p. 421). However, they themselves

²⁵This phenomenon differs from reader recognition of ambiguity which is a necessary and legitimate aspect of true ambiguity. In the former case the individual superimposes the uncertainty onto the text--the text itself contains no linguistic clues suggesting any type of ambiguity. In the latter case the text itself contains clues which suggest multiple meanings and depend upon recognition of them by the reader.

²⁶I.A. Richards, Practical Criticism (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1929), p. 13.

equivocate as to whether or not this is a legitimate type of ambiguity. The term as they view it refers to situations in which "clustering is minimal, so that responses vary altogether with the interpreter the meanings found being in fact imposed--projected--by the interpreter" (p. 421). The real reason for including this "type" of ambiguity into their schema is to reveal its importance in terms of "standards." "Projective" ambiguity with its implications of reader subjectivity sets "in relief the 'objectivity' . . . of the other ambiguities" (p. 421). Thus we do not "read into" the text the other types of ambiguity discussed in the earlier portion of this chapter; instead, as we have pointed out, they occur as an inherent part of the text.

The main difference between subjectivity and ambiguity according to Rimmon lies in the degree of reader interaction. While both phenomena involve interaction between the reader and the text,²⁷ reader subjectivity indicates much stronger interdependency, since, here, the reader selects meanings according to his individual psychic predispositions.²⁸ Ambiguity, on the other hand, exists as an objective element of the language itself. For example, Beardsley suggests the distinctively ambiguous quality that exists in the sentence "He rents the house," since a man cannot

²⁷For a discussion of reader interaction in ambiguous literature see below Chapter II.

²⁸This is, of course, closely akin to Winsatt and Beardsley's discussion of the Affective Fallacy,

simultaneously pay rent for and accept rent for a single house.²⁹ Even though the disjunctive ambiguity that operates in this particular sentence will probably disappear once we see the sentence in context, the disjunctive ambiguity exists as an objective element of language and not as a result of reader subjectivity. Problems arise when we interchange this cognate with ambiguity, since we then apparently condone any and all interpretations.³⁰

Ambivalence

Ambivalence, unlike ambiguity, refers to the coexistence of contrasting reader affective states whether or not they operate as a legitimate function of the word, phrase, or sentence. Ambivalence is a nuance of subjectivity which focuses on attitudes rather than responses. For example, the word "mother" may call up entirely different attitudes and emotions in two different readers, whether appropriate or not. To the abused child, for instance, the word "mother" may evoke feelings of hatred so intense that they obviate any objective reaction to the language. The stereotypic "mama's baby," may similarly exhibit unresolvable conflicting attitudes which disallow proper understanding of the language in question. Ambivalence of any kind clouds and obscures the appropriate overall effect of the language, and the peculiar affective state of the reader should not alter its function.

²⁹Beardsley, p. 145.

³⁰Rimmon, p. 18.

We must, however, differentiate between reader and speaker ambivalence. We can limit what we have discussed solely to the sphere of the reader of the language. In literature, an added dimension exists in which the created speaker or persona may also exhibit ambivalence. Critics generally support ambivalence in the speaker because it extends the density and complexity of the work. However, reader ambivalence is a virtue only if it parallels that of the speaker, and not if the reader's personal attitude interferes with the literary effect. Ambivalence, then, exists primarily as a result of the reader's attitudes toward something. Certainly, ambiguity may operate in conjunction with ambivalence, but we can better understand them as being functionally independent.

Vagueness

With the introduction of the term "vagueness," we encounter almost as many problems in definition as with the term "ambiguity" itself. Used in the typical evaluative sense, vagueness may result from either inept authorial style or our own careless reading of the text. But some scholars equate vagueness with the Wheelwrightian concept of "soft focus."³¹ As Robert I. Binnick said in an address to the members of the Chicago Linguistic Society, "A survey of recent literature has convinced me that I am not the only one who is vague about what ambiguity is, how it differs from vagueness, and

³¹See below pp. 38-40 for a discussion of this concept.

about what role both have to play . . . in . . . semantics."³² And so we find that "vagueness" is itself a vague word "used loosely, 'vaguely' . . . 'to apply to any kind of looseness, indeterminacy, or lack of clarity.'"³³ The problem, recognized by Binnick involves the acute lack of clarity of and distinction between the very terms which define vagueness and ambiguity and other characteristics of language. In order to compensate, many scholars have begun operationally defining terminology in question. This practice does not imply, however, that these scholars ignore past definitions, or that they discount them, but rather that they have refined them for their specific purposes. Literary critics Rimmon, Norrman,³⁴ Stanford, and Wheelwright all have realized the necessity for clarification of their critical vocabulary and have formulated clearer demarcations of the term "vagueness" in order to differentiate it from ambiguity. Rimmon and Norrman both equate vagueness with "indeterminacy," but Rimmon further suggests that we can use the term in two ways. First, vagueness implies the Aristotelean evaluative sense of "unclear," but we

³²R.I. Binnick, "Ambiguity and Vagueness," Papers from the Sixth Regional Meeting, Chicago Linguistic Society, eds. M.A. Campbell et al., (Chicago: University of Chicago Department of Linguistics, 1970), p. 147.

³³Binnick, p. 148.

³⁴Ralf Norrman, "Techniques of Ambiguity in the Fiction of Henry James," Acta Academiae Aboensis, Humaniora, ser. A, 54 (1977): 1-197.

may also use the term to refer to "hovering" possibilities.³⁵

Stanford suggests a more specific way of differentiating vagueness from ambiguity in terms of its "distinctness":

A vague word has a single but wide and ill-defined nebula of meaning within which there may be lack of precise definition but no positive discrepancy of meaning. Ambiguous words contain two or more quite distinct areas of meaning which may partially overlap but are generally identifiable and well-defined Strictly, then, verbal ambiguity is never the same as verbal vagueness--though in practice they frequently serve the same literary purposes when artistically used. Similarly, excess of ambiguity, that is a surfeit of meanings, brings confusion; excess of vagueness, that is, a deficiency of definite meaning, brings meaninglessness. The practical result is again much the same.³⁶

Semantically, then, vagueness refers to the "indeterminacy" or "indistinctness" of words and usually contrasts with "clarity" or "precision" (as does ambiguity) and thus carries connotations of reproach.³⁷

A vague word reveals many overtones of meaning that do not fit into the designated meaning, and as such closely resembles, yet differs from Philip Wheelwright's concept of "soft focus." This term borrowed from photography refers to words in which meanings do not possess precise outlines.³⁸ Every denotation carries what

³⁵Rimmon, p. 20.

³⁶William B. Stanford, Ambiguity in Greek Literature: Studies in Theory and Practice (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1939), p. 72.

³⁷Wheelwright, Burning Fountain, p. 87.

³⁸Wheelwright, "Semantics," p. 760.

Wheelwright calls a "connotative fringe" consisting of meanings that may differ for different people. Though we most often think of this concept as vagueness, a term carrying with it pejorative connotations, Wheelwright has suggested using "soft focus" to indicate a different type of literary effect that is more correctly a subcategory of plurisignation.³⁹ Wheelwright suggests using vagueness as a negative term indicating a lack of precision in language. "Soft focus," though, refers to a literary device which augments the overall effect of any given selection. Vagueness is thus negative because of inept use of language and literature, while "soft focus" is positive and intentional. As Rimmon further points out, "both 'vagueness' and 'ambiguity' lack the crystal-clear finality of univocality and are susceptible of double (or multiple) interpretation."⁴⁰ Ultimately, though, ambiguity, whether conjunctive or disjunctive, offers distinct clusters of meaning that are separable even if they mutually exclude each other. With ambiguity the meanings do not "hover" or remain indistinct. Thus ambiguities present no clues supporting any one interpretation or two or more supportable interpretations, mutually exclusive if disjunctive and simultaneously supportable if conjunctive, whereas a vague word or phrase "does not enter into the full commitment of any determined meaning."⁴¹ In other words, the literature does not present two or more meanings,

³⁹Wheelwright, Burning Fountain, p. 87.

⁴⁰Rimmon, p. 19.

⁴¹Rimmon, p. 19.

and as a result, the various nuances of the vague expression are all equally unprovable.

We offered earlier as analogous to disjunctive ambiguity the picture which resembles either the rabbit or the duck depending on how a person views it. Conjunctive ambiguity parallels a Dalian-like image within an image, both distinct and separate, but both functionally connected within the overall image. Vagueness, on the other hand, parallels the Rorschach test in which no specific figure emerges and therefore supports many varied interpretations.⁴² The inherent structural indistinctness of the ink blot allows tremendous variation of interpretation, as each individual may choose one interpretation that characterizes his peculiar state of mind.⁴³ The text itself does not provide clues suggesting distinctly different meanings. We see at this point the tremendous diversity in how people use the term "vagueness." Binnick pinpoints the crux of the problem:

. . . vagueness is not a concept which applies to language at all, but rather to the ideas which language expresses. Words are vague insofar as they represent vague concepts, . . . The implication of this is that the context relevant to vagueness is non-linguistic, whereas that relevant to ambiguity is linguistic.⁴⁴

Binnick, then, apparently supports Wheelwright, who asserts that the semantic character of language must have flexibility so that it

⁴²Rimmon, p. 19.

⁴³Rudolf Arnheim, Art and Visual Perception: A Psychology of the Creative Eye (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), p. 41. Also, this again reveals the parallel between vagueness and reader subjectivity which separates them from ambiguity.

⁴⁴Binnick, p. 151.

will remain closer to the nature of the experience that the language is describing.⁴⁵ We must recognize that words describing experiences are only a tiny part of experience and are open to all the variations that characterize experience itself.

Symbolism

Rimmon classifies symbols as distinct from ambiguities even though both involve two or more meanings. In the most general sense, "symbol" refers to anything which signifies something. Thus all words and numbers are symbols. In literature, though, "symbol" is applied "only to a word or set of words that signifies an object or event which itself signifies something else; that is, the word refers to something which suggests a range of reference beyond itself."⁴⁶ Symbols may be either conventional or private depending upon how nearly universal their meanings are. Well known symbols such as roads, sleep, the Phoenix, and the river Styx are generally accessible to most readers. But many poets, especially in the twentieth century, present their unique visions in private, often impenetrable symbols. The reader unfamiliar with the poet's private associations may have difficulty in interpreting his work. The poetry of W.B. Yeats, for instance, provides a challenge for any reader, because of his profuse use of private symbolism. A symbol

⁴⁵Wheelwright, Burning Fountain, p. 79.

⁴⁶M. H. Abrams, A Glossary of Literary Terms, 3d ed., (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), p. 9.

is distinct from conjunctive and disjunctive ambiguity in that the contextual or cultural constraints more strictly limit the range of appropriate meanings of a symbol. Ultimately, the symbol and its signified conjoin at a higher, metaphorical level, whereas meanings in conjunctive and disjunctive ambiguities do not "stand for" something greater than themselves.

We generally consider the symbol, like all forms of multiple meanings, as one of the richest poetic devices. As a means of evoking multiple meanings, a symbol may in turn provoke extensive subjectivity on the part of the reader. Though symbolism resembles other types of multiple meaning, it nevertheless, remains distinct. A symbol must conjoin with the thing it symbolizes, for only when the reader perceives the symbolism can the "truth" of the text be realized. Ambiguity, on the other hand, offers various meanings which may or may not conjoin and are simultaneously operable within the text.⁴⁷

Verbal irony

This effect indicates a disjunction of mutually exclusive meanings, wherein the true meaning is covertly concealed behind an overt false meaning.⁴⁸ More than any other, this effect is most frequently confused with ambiguity. Stanford points out that "Ambiguity is the

⁴⁷For an excellent discussion of symbolism and performance, see Frances L. McCurdy, "The Ultimate Commitment," The Study of Oral Interpretation, eds. Richard Haas and David A. Williams, (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1975), pp. 166-78.

⁴⁸Rimmon, p. 25.

more natural and commoner linguistic phenomenon; irony is the rarer and more sophisticated refinement of plain speaking Irony is a cultivated perversion of normal speech; ambiguity is an inevitable feature of all but the most scientific discourse."⁴⁹ Akin to disjunctive ambiguity in that two readings are indicated, irony ultimately remains distinct in that with irony the skilled reader faces no problem in deciding which meaning is "correct."⁵⁰ The key to ambiguity, however, is that we cannot decide which meaning is correct. Undoubtedly, irony and ambiguity are similar as devices of literature, but not equivalents of each other.

Additive and integrative "ambiguities"

Kaplan and Kris discuss two other types of "ambiguities," additive and integrative, which are closely related to Wheelwright's discussion of plurisignation. They define additive ambiguity as that situation one step beyond disjunctive ambiguity in which "the separate meanings, though still alternative, are no longer fully exclusive but are to some extent included one in the other. Rather than several distinct clusters, we have a set of clusters of varying range and with a common center" (p. 418). The word "distinct" clues us in to the fact that this definition resembles the concept of "vagueness" or "soft focus" explained earlier. We may interpret a

⁴⁹Stanford, pp. 67-68. Here, though, Stanford obviously equates ambiguity with unclearness.

⁵⁰Rimmon, pp. 15 and 25.

word such as "rich," in terms of money, value, or excellence (p. 418). But the word itself indicates indistinct responses, ones which overlap and finally merge into one another. These meanings differ only "in degree of specificity, or in what they add to the common core meaning" (p. 418). Kaplan and Kris also point out that the lack of clarity that plagues scientific discourse occurs as a result of additive ambiguity:

Terms like 'oligarchy,' 'depression,' 'culture pattern' are additively ambiguous in allowing multiple interpretations differing from one another chiefly in how much or how little they include (p. 418).

We add meanings, then, little by little until we recognize one core meaning.

Integrative ambiguity, also an apparent first cousin of plurisignation, occurs "when its manifold meanings evoke and support one another" (p. 420). Whereas in one conjunctive type, the connected meanings retain their individuality, in the integrative type, the meanings "are fully reconstituted--integrated, in short, into one complex meaning" (p. 420). We must not confuse this with additive ambiguity which "consists in a restructuring of a single field" (p. 420) in which the various meanings grow out of a common core and each meaning loses its distinctness. If the categories of integrative, additive, and conjunctive ambiguities seem confusing, the reader should remember that additive and integrative effects closely relate to plurisignation, a conjunctive effect.

Each of these cognate phenomena resembles conjunctive or disjunctive ambiguity, but is distinct. In order to simplify and

render this terminology more lucid, I should like to propose the following alternative. We should first regard ambiguity as a subset and not an equivalent of multiple meaning. However, we should stipulate two major categories of ambiguity within this generalized category of multiple meaning: disjunctive and conjunctive. Readers should have no problems in discerning ambiguity of the disjunctive type. However, conjunctive ambiguity refers to that phenomenon of language and literature wherein two or more meanings arise and either remain separate or conjoin. With conjunctive effects, no choice is necessary, because all the various meanings are workable. This basic definition of conjunctive ambiguity subsumes Rimmon's and Wheelwright's definition of conjunctive ambiguity and plurisignation, respectively.

We must point out at this juncture that although we can conveniently separate ambiguity into conjunctive and disjunctive effects, for the most part, the classification of conjunctive operates best on a theoretical level. The concept of conjunctive ambiguity that is different from but related to plurisignation as we have defined it is almost impossible to delineate in applied criticism. This is easier to understand when we realize that an example of conjunctive ambiguity (two interpretations which differ but complement each other and do not require choice between them) is hard to find in literature other than poetry. Undoubtedly some examples exist but they are difficult to uncover. While conjunctive ambiguity fits into Rimmon's and Kaplan and Kris's theory, neither of these discussions provide examples in literature. In fact, Rimmon ultimately says that

a conjunctive effect is not ambiguity-proper, but plurisignation. But as the originator of the term plurisignation discusses it, her definition differs. Thus in terms of applied theory (and especially in the narrative) the only real examples are either disjunctive ambiguity or plurisignation.⁵¹

In addition to understanding the conjunctive-disjunctive dichotomy, we must also keep in mind the many clues-no clues dichotomy. Ambiguity, though always involving more than one meaning, can arise in one of two ways: either as a result of no supporting clues or as a result of conflicting clues. Whatever the case, the effects remain similar.

In surveying the concept of ambiguity and effects often interchanged with it, we see that experts consider ambiguity in natural language an inevitable weakness, whereas when used artistically in literature, it carries positive connotations. Empson's study, for instance, declares ambiguity a good-making quality of literature wherein the simultaneous presence of alternative meanings enhance the value of the poem.

Empson's insistence on the positive value of ambiguity has fostered a tradition in literary circles which admires multiple

⁵¹Perhaps one example, pointed out to me by Mary Frances Hopkins, is John Updike's The Centaur. We may read this novel on the levels of myth and reality, and both levels are sustained throughout. They never conjoin into a higher, unified meaning. In this sense, the two readings do not exclude each other. The reader is invited to interpret each character as real or as a representation of the myth. They do not, however, symbolize or allegorize, but are the other characters.

meanings in literature. We are all familiar with critics who specify ambiguity as a criterion for excellence in literature, and we venerate this quality because, as Cleanth Brooks reminds us, it more accurately reflects life's complexity. Ambiguity has value according to artists and critics who defend it as producing a positive aesthetic effect, one realized in both the artist and the astute reader, whereby a single symbol contains a multiplicity of references and "thereby fulfill[s] at once a number of emotional needs."⁵² Thus that device we despise in natural language transforms itself into a thing of respect and admiration in literature. Nevertheless, it is apparent that the exact use of the term ambiguity and whether critics consider it good, bad, or neutral depends upon the particular "type" of ambiguity the user has in mind. We can see, in fact, that attitudes as regards the use of ambiguity vary:

. . . to the logician ambiguity seems a disease and deformity of speech; to the rhetorician its normality is unchallenged but its morality and usefulness may be questioned; to the poet it is a natural, subtle and effective instrument for poetic and dramatic purposes.⁵³

Narrative Ambiguity

Narrative ambiguity differs in many ways from the semantic kind. Certainly, verbal ambiguity can enhance the effects of narrative ambiguity, but by and large, each kind has peculiar qualities that make it unique. We can better understand the nature of narrative ambiguity if we examine them side by side.

⁵²Kaplan and Kris, p. 426.

⁵³Stanford, p. 6.

Semantic or verbal ambiguity exists solely as an aspect of the language, whether syntactical, grammatical, or written versus oral. Thus semantic ambiguity may operate in any steno use of language. Similarly, semantic ambiguity may arise in any literary use of language. In other words no genre will preclude ambiguity--prose, poetry, and narrative alike can fall prey to inartistic ambiguity as they all can exploit the artistic kind.

Narrative ambiguity arises in part from the language units which make up the narrative. However, the real distinction between narrative and semantic ambiguity comes about because of the differences between words and formalized literary structure. Narrative ambiguity arises in more than just words--it exists primarily because of the formalized structure of the narrative. As a result, ambiguity in a narrative will arise at units of the structure itself, units such as plot, character, setting, and point of view.

Although no prose-poetry distinctions exist between narrative and semantic ambiguities, perhaps we can better understand the differences between semantic and narrative ambiguities if we draw an analogy between the two kinds of ambiguity and the structure of poetry and the structure of prose fiction. Jonathan Raban in The Technique of Modern Fiction: Essays in Practical Criticism points out that poetry features language over the structure, whereas prose fiction in many cases, features the structural units:

. . . poetry implicitly suggests that all elements of the poem . . . can be contained in the mind simultaneously. Only then can the various parts be seen to interact. A poem divides naturally into . . . brief units Problems of the time lapse between beginning and ending a reading

of the poem, and of a narrative sequence which tends to dismiss each event as it deals with it, are rarely involved unless the poem is immensely long.

A novel, on the other hand, divides most easily into . . . longer units Our interest is generally sustained, not only by images and rhythmic repetitions, but by the organization of events in the narrative. The verbal quality of a novel is best described, not in terms of the striking image or occasional distortion of syntax, but by the continuously maintained effect of the overall tone.⁵⁴

Poetry makes more conscious use of its semantic structure through the continued use of imagery, figures of speech, and other linguistic devices. As a result, semantic ambiguity is particularly suited to it. Although language is certainly important in the narrative, its other peculiarities direct our interests toward larger elements such as plot and character development:

In prose the study of the language of any one short section is not enough. So much of our appreciation depends on knowledge acquired outside any particular passage--on our judgement of character and our interest in the development of plot and situation.⁵⁵

We can see through this analogy the difference between narrative and semantic ambiguities. Narrative ambiguity operates within units such as plot and character. Ambiguities frequently occur in plots where we cannot determine what the action is or we cannot interpret the action. For example, Guy de Maupassant's short story "Little Soldier" offers an example of disjunctive ambiguity where a young boy dies by falling from a bridge. We cannot interpret the cause of the action, and we cannot distinguish whether the death

⁵⁴Jonathan Raban, The Technique of Modern Fiction; Essays in Practical Criticism (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969), p. 16.

⁵⁵Raban, p. 17.

is accidental or intentional. Similarly, ambiguities abound in the characters portrayed in the works of playwrights Harold Pinter and Luigi Pirandello and novelist John Hawkes. For instance, Hawkes frequently makes use of characters whose motives we cannot interpret univocally. In The Goose on the Grave, for example, three monks savagely incinerate a young mother. Nowhere does the text clarify their motives for this brutal act, although several possibilities emerge.

Ambiguity arises in places other than plot and character. Narrative ambiguity also differs from the verbal kind because of the element of point of view. Often point of view fosters disjunctive and conjunctive ambiguities where specific clues corroborate two or more versions of an event. For instance, distance between the time of an event and remembrance of it can result in inaccuracy in its report with any but an omniscient narrator. And as a result of conflicting reports from two equally reliable characters, we may not know which version to believe if the narrative provides no other clues. Bias on the part of the narrator may render the account ambiguous because it then fosters two opposing sets of clues. Frequently, a shift in point of view serves as the source of sequential ambiguity because several characters exist simultaneously with whom we can identify.⁵⁶

⁵⁶Rimmon, p. 39. See John Updike's The Centaur for an example of ambiguity caused in this manner.

Whereas verbal ambiguity confines itself to words, phrases, and sentences, narrative ambiguity functions at the level of larger units. With a short story, for instance, narrative ambiguity arises not only in terms of our responses to individual word meanings, but also in terms of our overall interpretation of larger units such as action or event, character motivation, point of view, discourse, and other plot considerations. Narrative ambiguity may arise only in terms of the overall storyline itself (Is the governess mad in The Turn of the Screw?) or in terms of smaller units which together create the total narrative structure (Who is the girl in "Little Soldier" and did she cause the young boy to jump from the bridge?). But we must remember, too, that a novel or short story may not be ambiguous overall although some of its constituent units are ambiguous ("Little Soldier"). Similarly, a narrative may be ambiguous even if it does not contain a single unit which is in and of itself ambiguous (Frank Stockton's "The Lady, or the Tiger").

This brings us to a consideration of whether ambiguity is permanent or transitory, for ambiguity may be either. Many of the ambiguities we will discuss in Hawkes are permanent in that the story never resolves certain questions it raises. Even at the narrative's end, we still find ourselves groping for clues which will positively swing the balance so that one of the suggested possible meanings seems finally correct. For instance, we never finally learn whether Hugh's death in The Blood Oranges was suicidal or accidental. This book provides an example of a permanent

ambiguity created and sustained as a result of a lack of clues to support one or the other possibility. Henry James's The Turn of The Screw likewise presents a permanent, unresolved ambiguity. Here, however, two opposing sets of clues sustain the ambiguity as to the governess's reliability. Ambiguities which exist only as a fleeting element of the text are temporary. These ambiguities are at some point in the text resolved.⁵⁷

In analyzing narrative ambiguity, we need to identify basic units which contribute to the ambiguity of a text.⁵⁸ These units with which we will concern ourselves are action, character, setting, and point of view.⁵⁹

Effects Confused with Narrative Ambiguity

Like verbal ambiguity, narrative ambiguity also shares problems of being confused with cognate phenomena. Subjective readings frequently mistaken as ambiguity, suggest those interpretations each individual gives to a specific work. Rimmon points out the frequently used argument that "there are as many works as . . . readers."⁶⁰ However, to allow infinite interpretations of any work

⁵⁷I discuss these aspects of ambiguity in more detail in Chapter IV.

⁵⁸Rimmon, pp. 41-42.

⁵⁹I will discuss these elements in greater detail in the fourth chapter, as I will also discuss devices of narrative ambiguity.

⁶⁰Rimmon, p. 12.

opens all literature to what Stanford calls "unescapable ambiguity."⁶¹ Certainly, subjectivity may play a part in interpreting a narrative as ambiguous, but the final decision rests not in the reader's psyche but in the text itself. Some texts undoubtedly invite subjective analysis because they lack centers of orientation and they do not present two or more clearly identifiable meanings. James Joyce's Finnegan's Wake along with much contemporary experimental literature contain sections which we may interpret in a multiplicity of ways. But most literature provides sufficient clues to allow us to discern whether or not our reading is subjective and whether or not it is truly ambiguous. To assume, as some do, that we may approach literary works subjectively is a grave mistake. The peculiar effects of ambiguity partially rest in the reader's awareness of the device and in an ability to examine objectively the clues or lack of clues creating and supporting the ambiguity. If we allow overextensive subjective indulgence in an ambiguous work we may unwittingly transform the author's work into our work, and we may lose its effect.

A second effect often confused with narrative ambiguity is allegory. We should properly read allegory as a literal narrative and a figurative embodiment of spiritual meaning. As M. H. Abrams defines it, "An allegory is a narrative in which the agents and action, and sometimes the setting as well, are contrived not only to

⁶¹Stanford, p. 87.

make sense in themselves, but also to signify a second, correlated order of persons, things, concepts, or events."⁶² Thus in allegory, the literal interpretation reflects the figurative essence and the two levels finally conjoin. Allegory usually clearly emerges in narrative and should not mislead most readers.

Similar to verbal irony, narrative irony juxtaposes two narratives, one explicitly stated, the other covertly implied. The clue to the correct reading comes from the irony itself, whereas with ambiguity no interpretation can be singled out as correct. Irony, however, has a correct drift which is unequivocally implied within the text. Rimmon says that one clear clue to the presence of irony rather than ambiguity is the unreliable narrator or character. Once we recognize unreliability, our interpretation should proceed in opposition to the character's account. If, on the other hand, ambiguity operates, we would be unable to discern absolutely whether the character is unreliable or not. Thus Rimmon asserts that all unreliability denotes irony and not ambiguity.⁶³

⁶²Abrams, p. 4.

⁶³Rimmon, p. 15. She assumes, however, that the unreliability will be clear to the reader. Wayne Booth, in contrast, claims that much ambiguity is unintentional and provokes confusion because of the fact that inadequate warning operates in the narrative. He sees this as a weakness of much literature, and points to The Turn of the Screw as an example. See The Rhetoric of Fiction, pp. 316ff. Booth, however, also indicates that he himself is aware of a difference between ambiguity and irony when he remarks in a footnote in The Rhetoric of Irony:

Critical debate about Swift's satire ["A Modest Proposal"] and irony runs by now to what must be thousands of books and articles. The central issues are incisively analyzed

Summary

Admittedly, when discussing both verbal and narrative ambiguity, it is exceedingly difficult to keep the many varied terms separate and meaningful, but in order to deal with the specific machinations of ambiguity in analysis and performance we must do so. A large part of the problem in dealing with ambiguity results from this overlap and confusion of terminology. This chapter has attempted to separate, define, and clarify the many cognate terms that have come under the umbrella-term "ambiguity." Terms such as "vagueness" with its pejorative connotations, and terms connoting positive value such as "plurisignation" and "soft focus" should now be clear, since we understand their unique effects in language and literature and how they are similar but are different from ambiguity. Ambiguity is a phenomenon of natural language as well as of literature. It can be

by Edward W. Rosenheim, Jr. . . . Mr. Rosenheim rightly notes that to call a work by Swift "ironic" says practically nothing about it, given the grotesque looseness of the term; he then in effect puts irony to one side and discusses what I call stable ironies under other critical terms. It is good strategy, given the world's habit of equating irony with ambiguity, . . . (p. 105-06).

See also pp. 126-27 of Irony where he clearly indicates his concept of ambiguity as being identical to the concept held by Rimmon and Beardsley. He contends that confusing ambiguity with stable irony diminishes the "delights" of the latter. Ironically, he uses the same rabbit-duck drawing to describe visually irony and not ambiguity (p. 127). He later uses the term "disjunctive" to describe one type of stable irony very similar to the either-or effect that I call disjunctive ambiguity (p. 128). In Chapter IV below, I discuss unreliability of characters and narrators as a device of ambiguity when we cannot positively determine if the character in question is reliable or not.

disjunctive where meanings exclude and inhibit each other providing no way for the reader to choose between them or conjunctive where meanings remain distinctly separable but complementary and thus require no choice. Additive and integrative ambiguities are more accessible to readers when labeled "soft focus" and "plurisignation," a subset of conjunctive ambiguity. However, we must also keep in mind that conjunctive and disjunctive ambiguities arise as a result of contradictory clues or lack of clues which creates doubt or uncertainty as to the proper meaning. Disjunctive and conjunctive ambiguities both must offer two or more meanings. These two or more distinct meanings arise, and either the context can provide two or more sets of supporting clues (The Turn of the Screw), or the narrative may suggest two or more possible solutions without providing any clues to choose between them ("The Lady, or the Tiger").

CHAPTER II

THE AESTHETIC VALUE OF AMBIGUITY

Ambiguity, semantic or narrative, operates as an integral part of the reading process as does the role of the perceiver. This chapter will briefly examine the changing understanding of the role of the perceiver, the function and value of ambiguity, and how they are related; finally, it will discuss newer theories of literary ambiguity versus more traditional views of literature.

The Role of the Perceiver

Over the last thirty years, great changes have taken place in scholar's concept of the role of the perceiver in aesthetic experience. For years artistic criticism relegated the perceiver to a position of passive reception in which the object (in our case the literature) acted upon the perceiver. Emphasis centered on the work of art, the artist, or how the piece mirrored the universe it sought to depict. In 1934, however, the publication of John Dewey's Art as Experience and other landmark books which soon followed marked a radical departure from these more traditional theories.¹ For Dewey, as well as others, the perceiver became an active, creative participant in the aesthetic experience. In a sense the perceiver actually

¹See, for instance, Louise M. Rosenblatt's books.

helps to create his own individualized literary experience out of the framework the work of art provides. Generally, the work of art will foster in the perceiver a series of experiences which may run parallel to the experiences of the originator of the work. At the same time, though, the perceiver effects new experiences by way of his individualized reactions and responses to the work. In this way he passes from a role of the passive recipient to one of the active participator.

Other aestheticians and philosophers such as Beardsley, Pepper, Arnheim, and Berleant have formalized similiar views regarding the role of the perceiver. In particular, the recent development of phenomenology has garnered attention of scholars in fields including our own concerned with the aesthetic process. In explaining the reading process phenomenologically, Wolfgang Iser suggests that when we consider the literary work, we "must take into account not only the actual text but also, and in equal measure, the actions involved in responding to that text."² Thus the literary work as experience has two poles: the artistic and the aesthetic. The artistic pole refers to the author-created text, while the aesthetic pole refers to the realization of the text by the individual reader. As a result, we cannot correctly equate the literary work with the text

²Wolfgang Iser, The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), p. 274.

alone or merely with the text's reader realization. The literary work as actual experience according to Iser lies somewhere in between.

Norman Holland, another supporter of the active perceiver viewpoint, has approached literary perception through psychoanalytic theory.³ For Holland, the writer reaches a reader through a mixture of what he labels the writer's and the reader's identity theme. Each reader responds to a literary selection creatively as he tries to "compose from the elements of the work a match to his own characteristic style."⁴ As a result, the author exerts no final control over reader responses. Instead:

The artist leaves behind him a structure he thinks complete, and so it is--for him. For his audience, however, it is an experience yet to be realized, and different people will realize it in different ways. Some will try to get out what the artist intended (despite the "intentional fallacy"). Others will pursue a "true" interpretation. Professional readers may try to set the work in an historical or biographical or theoretical framework. All, however, will try to build an experience from some or all of the words--the raw materials--the writer left behind him and within the constraints imposed by the ordinary syntactic and semantic relations among those words.⁵

Certainly, any good author probably will exert some level of influence on the reader's imagination, since he has at his disposal both literary techniques and rhetorical manipulation of them. But as

³Norman N. Holland, Poems in Persons: An Introduction to the Psychoanalysis of Literature. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1975).

⁴Holland, p. 145.

⁵Holland, pp. 147-48.

Holland suggests, no wise author will attempt to lay out the entire picture before his readers because only by stimulating the reader's imagination can he possibly hope to involve him with the text. And only through this reader involvement can he realize the true "intentions" of the work. If, indeed, the author did exert final control of the reader through the text, then the work of art would become a "fixed stimulus eliciting a fixed response."⁶ And as Holland points out, common experience tells us this simply is not true. Instead, the writer creates an overall structure which the reader "finishes" and thus recreates for himself. Some readers will undoubtedly commit the Affective Fallacy and distort the text, but generally the structural framework of the text precludes overextensive and irrelevant perversion.

Two aestheticians who earlier realized the potential harm in this have emphasized how the object itself and not the author controls the reader in such a way that the personal tastes and feelings of a particular individual do not get in the way and cancel out the work itself. Stephen C. Pepper in The Work of Art and Monroe Beardsley in Aesthetics both admit the individual nature of the role the perceiver plays in the aesthetic experience, but nevertheless insist that the object ultimately acts as a control over irrelevant

⁶Holland, p. 146.

feelings and reactions. As a result of the combination of individual perception buffered by object control, different readers can interpret a single text in different ways and still remain within an accepted range of "correctness."⁷

Arnold Berleant provides added insight into the changing role of the perceiver. According to an address given by Berleant to the Speech Communication Association convention in Houston, Texas in 1975, the reader not only participates in the aesthetic experience, but simultaneously becomes a "performer" of the work. Because he becomes intimately involved in the experience and helps to recreate it, he also becomes a shaping force of the experience itself. Thus readers, according to Holland, recreate pieces in terms "of their own pattern of drives and defenses."⁸ Typically, novels or short stories confront the reader with a series of presumably solvable problems while simultaneously withholding solutions. Therefore, the reader strives to formulate answers and solutions. The novel presents, then, an experiential design intended to involve the reader in the world of the work and to help him understand his own world better.⁹ Only upon the convergence of text and reader can the literary work come into existence and attain a life of its own.¹⁰

⁷Holland agrees, p. 146.

⁸Holland, p. 155.

⁹Iser, p. xi.

¹⁰Iser, p. 275.

Authors as well as critics frequently comment upon the active nature of the reader-agent. For example Laurence Stern conceives of a work that is

. . . something like an arena in which reader and author participate in a game of the imagination. If the reader were given the whole story, and there was nothing left for him to do, then his imagination would never enter the field, the result would be the boredom which inevitably arises when everything is laid out cut and dried before us. A literary text must therefore be conceived in such a way that it will engage the reader's imagination in the task of working things out for himself, for reading is only a pleasure when it is active and creative.¹¹

Further, experimental novelist Alain Robbe-Grillet demands and expects interaction on the part of the reader:

. . . the author today proclaims his absolute need for the reader's cooperation, an active, conscious creative assistance. What he asks of him is no longer to receive ready-made a world complete, full, closed upon itself, but on the contrary to participate in a creation, to invent in his turn the work--and the world--and thus to learn to invent his own life.¹²

Clearly, then, the literary work and the author can exert only limited control over readers because the reader maintains his active role in the aesthetic process. Recognizing the reader's creative role does not, however, give justification for an individual's assigning idiosyncratic meanings to the text or ignoring essential elements of it.

¹¹Iser, p. 275.

¹²Alain Robbe-Grillet, For a New Novel: Essays on Fiction (New York: Grove Press, 1965), p. 156.

Function and Value of Ambiguity

According to Rimmon we can traditionally account for the functions and value of any literary text in two major ways: mimetic and non-mimetic.¹³ In mimetic literary experience the elements of the selection in some way reflect phenomenon outside itself in the "world of reality." With non-mimetic literature, however, the experience of reading focuses on the process of reading itself and on the way in which the reader's attention focuses on the reading process. In this way non-mimetic literature becomes a "self-reflexive meditation on the medium of art, rather than a mirroring of a reality outside art."¹⁴ Non-mimetic literature frequently includes ambiguities of one kind or another. This tendency toward including ambiguity often occurs in anti-realistic literature of the twentieth century, literature which often omits integral pieces of information in such a way that particular elements of plot and character remain unresolved either temporarily or permanently. This device of ambiguity, called a "gap," leaves a space in the text which encourages the reader to search out clues in order to complete or fill in the missing information. Not all gaps cause ambiguity, but many do. While we read a detective story, for example, we are continually faced with a multiplicity of potential answers to the question, "Who committed the murder? The butler? The maid? The

¹³Shlomith Rimmon, The Concept of Ambiguity--the Example of James (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), p. 227.

¹⁴Rimmon, p. 227.

wife?" Throughout the narrative any one of these choices seems plausible and in this way the work constantly "teases" us. The work and its ambiguity further reinforce our role as an active participant in solving the murder--a "silent partner" of the fictional detective, if you will. This teasing of our mental faculties acts to pit us against the rhetorical devices of the story designed to outwit us. The final outcome of the mystery may or may not provide added pleasure depending on whether or not we chose the correct alternative. If we chose correctly, we feel a sense of accomplishment. But even if we guessed incorrectly, we still experience a sense of completion and satisfaction, since our uncertainty has been resolved. Further, even in situations of permanent, unresolved ambiguity, we experience a kind of pleasure in attempting to solve the mystery; this is what encouraged our probing throughout the mystery. This "mental teasing" intrigues us and further catches us up in the story. As a result, the gaps we attempt to fill in cause in us active rather than passive participation.¹⁵ And in this way we become a kind of collaborator with the author.

As Kaplan and Kris point out, ambiguity functions in literature "not as a carrier of a content which is somehow in itself poetic, but as the instrument by which a content is made poetic through the process of re-creation."¹⁶ This is not to say that

¹⁵Rimmon, p. 228.

¹⁶Abraham Kaplan and Ernst Kris, "Esthetic Ambiguity," Philosophy and Phenomenological Research 8 (March 1948):430.

ambiguity is the sole resource of poetic effectiveness. Obviously, aspects such as individual style, beauty of language, and compelling character depiction all contribute to the overall aesthetic effect of the work. However, the pleasure of what the poet Mallarmé calls "guessing little by little" frequently motivates the active, participative aesthetic experience.¹⁷

Therefore, ambiguity makes the reading process dynamic, and according to Rimmon, overrides the passive consumer of literature and art because the activation of the reading process breaks up the "automatism involved in passive consumption."¹⁸ The author has, as Rimmon records, helped to "make . . . his reader very much as he makes his character."¹⁹ Certainly, any artist tries to control the degree of ambiguity or clarity in his literature; Henry James, for instance, leaned toward an abundance of ambiguity thus creating multiple meanings and a sense of concealment. Norrman points out that "by this choice he [James] shifted a larger share of the creative process to the reader, thus gaining access to a wide register of aesthetic response as well as incurring the risk of losing control over the process of the reader's creative work."²⁰

¹⁷Kaplan and Kris, p. 430.

¹⁸Rimmon, p. 229.

¹⁹Rimmon, p. 229.

²⁰Ralf Norrman, "Techniques of Ambiguity in the Fiction of Henry James," Acta Academiae Aboensis, Humaniora, ser. A, 54 (1977): 7.

Undoubtedly, other authors, notably John Hawkes, also lean toward concealment and thus help render the literary experience more dynamic.

The function of ambiguity becomes clearer if we once again consider the reading process itself. Rimmon contends that, generally, the process demands that the reader integrate various data by examining individual clues as they support and/or contradict one another. The reader must then mentally establish hypotheses as to what has occurred, what is presently going on, and what is likely to occur in the future. Similarly, he must explain character motives and actions.²¹ Frequently, when we read a story, we assume the action is complete. Raban points out that together the "narrator and reader recall and reconstruct past events, viewing them with the hindsight of retrospective knowledge the action of the story . . . exists in an ordered sequence, irrelevances eliminated, ready for judgement by the reader."²² However, past reading experiences tell us that few narratives function in quite so straightforward a manner. Informational gaps occur, rendering our view distorted. Often contradictory points of view further distort our sense of the story. In this way some gaps as well as some intentional distortions create ambiguity. And although we begin

²¹Rimmon, p. 9.

²²Jonathan Raban, The Technique of Modern Fiction: Essays in Practical Criticism (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969), p. 23.

reading a narrative expecting a resolution of the ambiguity, we may end the reading process realizing that these gaps of information will never be filled in.

Our ability to perceive ambiguity is a relative matter, as Rimmon says, one governed by our personal make-up and level of sophistication. For instance, a reader accustomed to ambiguity will probably spot it quickly; some readers in fact may read ambiguity into a non-ambiguous narrative. In reading ambiguous narratives we continually seek a balance between the polysemantic nature of the text and our own "illusions" or expectations. And Iser reaffirms that although we begin with certain expectations, these are necessarily shattered in order for the aesthetic experience to occur.²³

Thus Ritchie asserts that:

. . . to say merely that "our expectations are satisfied" is to be guilty of another serious ambiguity. At first sight such a statement seems to deny the obvious fact that much of our enjoyment is derived from surprises, from betrayals of our expectations. The solution to the paradox is to find some ground for a distinction between "surprise" and "frustration." Roughly, the distinction can be made in terms of the effects which the two kinds of experiences have upon us. Frustration blocks or checks activity. It necessitates new orientation for our activity, if we are to escape the cul de sac. Consequently, we abandon the frustrating object and return to blind impulsive activity. On the other hand, surprise merely causes a temporary cessation of the exploratory phase of the experience, and a recourse to intense contemplation and scrutiny. In the latter phase the surprising elements are seen in their

²³Iser, p. 287.

connection with what has gone before, with the whole drift of the experience, and the enjoyment of these values is then extremely intense.²⁴

In the case of disjunctive narrative ambiguity, Gombrich points out that we can never be "aware" of the ambiguity, but only of the various interpretations of it.²⁵ Though it is difficult to conceptualize, we can perhaps better understand this idea by realizing that only through the act of "switching" interpretations do we recognize that opposing and mutually exclusive readings operate. We can train ourselves to switch more and more quickly between them, but we cannot hold onto the two conflicting interpretations at once.²⁶ To do so would remove the ambiguity from the world of disjunction and thrust it incorrectly into the world of conjunction. Only by limiting our attention to one interpretation at a time may we perceive the disjunctive nature of the ambiguity. The "trick" of this type of ambiguity will not work without our continued active contribution to it. If we ever once solve the ambiguity (in the case of many detective novels, for example) we

²⁴Benbow Ritchie, "The Formal Structure of the Aesthetic Object," The Problems of Aesthetics: A Book of Readings, eds. Eliseo Vivas and Murray Krieger (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965), pp. 230f.

²⁵E. H. Gombrich, Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), p. 195.

²⁶Gombrich, p. 195. He discusses visual, not literary ambiguity.

may never recover the impression it made on us while we searched for the correct solution.²⁷ Disjunctive ambiguity in literature, as in art, then, forces us to exercise our imagination and share in the "creative adventure" of the author.²⁸

And because both disjunctive and conjunctive ambiguities force the reader to concentrate more closely on the text, they also elevate the importance of the contents of the work. Ambiguity thus helps to create the subject matter²⁹ and draws attention to the work's own compositional principle. In this way, ambiguous narratives become "self-reflexive meditations" of the non-mimetic type. Anytime we confront gaps and twists in a narrative, they draw us into the action and as the reader's imagination fills in these gaps, the process of so doing influences the effect of the written part of the text. A whole dynamic process then results as Iser points out that:

. . . the written text imposes certain limits on its unwritten implications in order to prevent these from becoming too blurred and hazy, but at the same time these implications, worked out by the reader's imagination, set the given situation against a background which endows it with far greater significance than it might have seemed to possess on its own.³⁰

²⁷Gombrich, p. 228.

²⁸Gombrich, p. 278.

²⁹Norrman, p. 118.

³⁰Iser, p. 276.

Disjunctive ambiguity frustrates habitual expectations of the relatively passive reader. Permanently unresolved gaps counteract our belief that the central puzzle will finally achieve resolution. And the resulting deautomatization created by the permanent gap enhances our new perception of the reality and directs our attention to the medium itself.³¹ Conjunctive ambiguity, on the other hand, presents us with two or more interpretations, different, yet compatible, not contradictory. It thus relieves us of choice. If we are perceptive readers and examine the clues inherent in the text, we will see these different interpretations and gain in much the same way that Empson asserts we gain in reading multivocal poetry. Further, in realizing that these different meanings all fit the context created by the textual clues, we once again realize the dynamic nature of the reading process. And the text again becomes a "self-reflexive meditation" for us.

In the opposite vein, we must also realize that unresolved ambiguity in mimetic literature may certainly cause discontent in the reader. Inability to decide whether the governess in The Turn of the Screw was good or evil may cause such ambivalence in the reader that overwhelming frustration invalidates the effect of the aesthetic experience. Yet even this may become a positive consequence, since it parallels typical life experiences. Daily, we

³¹Rimmon, p. 230.

face cognitive and emotional dissonance as a result of having to make decisions, many of which seem impossible. Thus literature presenting an ambiguous situation which causes distress may fortify us in our own lives against the onslaught of daily decision-making. By contemplating ambiguity in a detached manner, we may better control our reactions to it in real life. Maurice Merleau-Ponty exemplifies typical existentialist philosophy which believes ambiguity is the essence of human existence.³² The existentialist considers ambiguity in morality a natural consequence of man's state as a being in the world. Existential scholar Shoury explains that: "This ambiguity is attributed to the problematic nature of the human situation on the one hand, and to the paradoxical makeup of man himself, on the other. If man is all that simple, morality can be simplified; but if man is complex, morality cannot escape the complexity of human nature."³³ Our realization of the fundamental ambiguous nature of life and ultimate triumph over ensuing dissonance is good, and existential philosophers such as Merleau-Ponty think it is a mistake to endow the concept of ambiguity with negative connotations.

An added advantage of dealing with ambiguous literature concerns the following fact:

³²John F. Bannan, The Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty. (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1967).

³³Imad T. Shouery, Ambiguity and Relevance in Sartre's Existentialism (Beirut: Library of Liban, 1973), p. 4.

In life we cannot allow equal tenability to contradictions, and although we sometimes realize that the information we have is insufficient for choice, choice itself always seems imperative. Art, on the other hand, makes the coexistence of contradictions possible. Indeed, the creation of ambiguous works is one of art's ways of solving the problem of contradictions--solving it not by choice but by an artistic dramatization of their coexistence.³⁴

We can say that ambiguity dramatizes the on-going uncertainty of our own human life.³⁵

Ambiguity, then, "is the result of conflict in choices, the uncertainties of the outcome of these choices, and the lack of a guarantee which affirms their validity once and for all."³⁶ In spite of the possible frustration ambiguity in literature may at times provoke, it nevertheless accurately reflects the human situation itself.

Ambiguity versus Traditional Literary Theories

Ambiguity in narrative literature is not a new phenomenon. However, theories about its value are relatively new when considered against the more expansive background of traditional theories of literature. For centuries literature was regarded as providing "satisfying order and coherence in an otherwise disorderly,

³⁴Rimmon, p. 234.

³⁵Rimmon, p. 227.

³⁶Shouery, p. 5.

fragmented, and confusing universe."³⁷ Most critics believed in the Aristotelean concept that literature's final effect brings about reconciliation and equilibrium.³⁸ However, recently, more and more artists and critics are committing themselves to the view that "art should be used to shock, disrupt, irritate, and discomfit."³⁹ One extended attack on the equation of art and order belongs to Morse Peckham, author of Man's Rage for Chaos. In this compelling treatise, the author argues that art characterizes some kind of stylistic discontinuity or non-functional stylistic dynamism. He states that the "distinguishing attribute of the artist's role is to create occasions for disorientation, and of the perceiver's role to experience it."⁴⁰ He further says that "the distinguishing mark of the perceiver's transaction with the work of art is discontinuity of experience, not continuity; disorder, not order; emotional disturbance, not emotional catharsis" (p. 314). He concludes by asserting that art allows us to cope with disorientation in other areas: "Art is the exposure to the tensions and problems of a

³⁷Walter J. Slatoff, With Respect to Readers--Dimensions of Literary Response (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970), p. 137.

³⁸Slatoff, p. 138.

³⁹Slatoff, p. 139, footnote.

⁴⁰Morse Peckham, Man's Rage for Chaos (Philadelphia: Chilton Books, 1965), p. 314.

false world so that man may endure exposing himself to the tensions and problems of the real world" (p. 314).

A careful examination of current narrative literature reveals much less order and striving for catharsis than we have traditionally expected. Robert M. Adams has revealed ways in which and reasons why writers deliberately avoid formal resolutions in their works. He asserts that some authors deliberately include disharmonies or impasses. This demonstrates that a large body of literature exhibits some variety of what he calls the "open form" or that literary structure which exhibits meanings, intentions, and emphases which includes a major unresolved conflict in order to display its very unresolvedness.⁴¹ He points to such well known writers as Shakespeare, Pirandello, Brecht, Williams, Flaubert, Woolf, D. H. Lawrence, and Gertrude Stein, as exhibiting open elements. Furthermore, though many works are more or less closed in some respects, they encompass many tonal ambiguities or equivocations. Hawthorne, for example, exhibits this characteristic in choosing words such as "maybe," "perhaps," and "might," which take on "an almost talismanic quality."⁴² Melville, Conrad, and Faulkner, especially in their narrators, offer alternative hypotheses and paradoxes. Frequently, the narrator doubts his own observations, making the

⁴¹Robert M. Adams, Stains of Discord (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1958), p. 13.

⁴²Slatoff, p. 154.

reader even more doubtful. Other writers Slatoff points out as writing in ambiguous tones are Swift, Chekhov, Forster, Joyce, Nabokov, Genet, and Beckett.⁴³

We can see, then, that communication in literature between the reader and the author differs radically from the transmission of information in many other fields of human activity. Because ambiguities may decrease information while increasing the number of possible interpretations, their informational content is less but conveys a wider range of semantic surface meaning. Thus this weakness in language often becomes a strength in narrative literature.⁴⁴

Summary

Ambiguity when used as an artistic device of literature undeniably enhances the effects of that literature. Whether it acts as a reflection of life itself, or merely functions to draw attention to the reading process thus engendering the "active" rather than passive receiver, ambiguity is valuable. Since ambiguity (resolved or unresolved, conjunctive or disjunctive) functions in much of today's literature, we as performers need to recognize its source and value so that we can better transmit it to our audiences. One frequently performed genre which contains ambiguity is the

⁴³Slatoff, pp. 154-55.

⁴⁴Norrman, p. 7.

modern narrative. In order to preserve the ambiguity in performances of narrative literature, we must first understand specific ways in which the author can create ambiguity. The next chapter will examine the concept of ambiguity and performance as viewed by scholars in the field of oral interpretation. Chapter IV will then examine specific devices available to all authors which create and sustain ambiguity in narrative literature.

CHAPTER III

AMBIGUITY AND ORAL INTERPRETATION

Literature in the field of oral interpretation generally ignores narrative ambiguity. And even though the term "ambiguity" as an aspect of the poetic reading process sometimes appears in this literature, it generally has merited little attention. In reviewing the major textbooks, articles, and unpublished materials in the field of oral interpretation, we immediately notice that most textbooks ignore the concept altogether; the few remaining which do discuss ambiguity focus on the verbal or linguistic type, especially as it functions in poetry. Furthermore, only a slight minority even allude to the concept of narrative ambiguity.

The purpose of this chapter is to examine treatments of ambiguity in textbooks, articles, and unpublished dissertations and theses. Some potentially relevant articles reveal content disappointing in terms of applicability to the performance of literature.¹ For example, in an article called "Image and Ambiguity" Martin J. Medhurst focuses on the film image in The Exorcist.² Though he

¹See, for example, Robert Norton, "Manifestations of Ambiguity Tolerance Through Verbal Behavior in Small Groups," Communication Monographs 43 (March 1976): 35-43.

²Martin J. Medhurst, "Image and Ambiguity: A Rhetorical Approach to THE EXORCIST," The Southern Speech Communication Journal 44 (Fall 1978): 73-92.

discusses "ambiguity as strategy" in the film,³ he does not examine in depth specific devices of ambiguity which might parallel devices used in literature.⁴ Of necessity we will discuss both the verbal and narrative types of ambiguity, since the two overlap. We will first consider the concept of ambiguity; then we will discuss the performance of ambiguity, as it appears in articles and textbooks. Finally, we will examine unpublished materials for the same.

The Concept of Ambiguity

By and large, the majority of textbooks in the field ignore the concept of ambiguity. Of the forty-four major textbooks readily available, twenty-eight failed to use the term "ambiguity" anywhere in their indices and subsequent perusal of each text confirmed this absence.⁵ Don Geiger, for instance, does not mention ambiguity in

³Medhurst, p. 87.

⁴Of course, the subtitle indicates that that was not his primary purpose, since he is in a different field.

⁵See those textbooks listed in full bibliographic form in the final bibliography by Jean DeSales Bertram; Keith Brooks; S.H. Clark, revised by Maud May Babcock; Leslie Irene Coger and Melvin R. White; Edwin Cohen; S.S. Curry; Baxter M. Geeting; Carolyn A. Gilbert; Charlotte I. Lee (Oral Reading of the Scriptures); Joanna Hawkins Maclay; Margaret Prendergast McLean; Jerry V. Pickering; Louise M. Scrivner; David W. Thompson and Virginia Fredricks; Argus Tresidder; Donald N. Walters; Paul Campbell (The Speaking and the Speakers of Literature); Lionel Crocker and Louis M. Eich; Sara Lowrey and Gertrude E. Johnson; Chester Clayton Long; Keith Brooks, Eugene Bahn and L. LaMont Okey; Virgil D. Sessions and Jack B. Holland; Charles Henry Woolbert and Severina A. Nelson; Jere Veilleux; Joanna H. Maclay and Thomas O. Sloan.

his two influential books,⁶ nor do some of the widely used basic textbooks: Campbell's The Speaking and the Speakers of Literature, 1966; Crocker and Eich's Oral Reading: Discussion and Principles and an Anthology of Practice Materials from Literature Classical and Modern, 1955; Lowery and Johnson's Interpretative Reading: Techniques and Selections, 1942; Chester Clayton Long's The Liberal Art of Interpretation, 1974; Brooks, Bahn, and Okey's The Communicative Act of Oral Interpretation, 1967; Sessions and Holland's Your Role in Oral Interpretation, 1968; Woolbert and Nelson's The Art of Interpretative Speech: Principles & Practices, 1968; Veilleux's Oral Interpretation: The Re-creation of Literature: A Text-Anthology for Oral Interpretation, 1967; and Maclay and Sloan's Interpretation: An Approach to the Study of Literature, 1972. Further, Armstrong and Brandes' The Oral Interpretation of Literature does include a brief discussion of some cognate phenomena of ambiguity,⁷ but does not discuss ambiguity per se.

Ambiguity as Multiple Meaning

Of the remaining texts which examine ambiguity, most discuss it only briefly and employ the term in its linguistic capacity as Empson does. In other words ambiguity appears as an equivalent of

⁶Don Geiger, The Sound, Sense, and Performance of Literature (Chicago: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1963). See also The Dramatic Impulse in Modern Poetics (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967).

⁷Chloe Armstrong and Paul D. Brandes, The Oral Interpretation of Literature (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1963), pp. 259-62.

or related to multiple meaning, especially in poetry. Paul Hunsinger's text is typical.⁸ In one paragraph in the section dealing with technical communicative aspects of poetry, he uses the term ambiguity and discusses suggestion, implication, and levels of meaning, yet never really clarifies these terms:

Rooted in the nature of poetry itself are special problems for the communicative interpreter. One of the most difficult is getting the depth, intensity and totality of the poetic meaning or concept. The poet often epitomizes in just a few words what might take several paragraphs or pages in prose. He achieves his effect by suggestion or implication. There is the problem of ambiguity in poetry because of the various levels of meaning or the deliberate use of words which have several meanings (p. 85).

Moreover, Hunsinger reflects the current trend in textbooks of alluding to the positive nature of ambiguity as it functions in poetry. Like many scholars in the field he mentions both intentional and unintentional ambiguity and the fact that the former is a characteristic of good poetry while the latter serves only to confuse the reader and is thus a characteristic of inferior poetry:

Good poetry is often deliberately ambiguous, while poor poetry is often accidentally ambiguous. The skilled artist will use lifelike terms to express his thoughts and feelings. The communicative interpreter must be aware of the difference between intentional and unintentional ambiguity (p. 86).

He urges the reader to acquaint himself with the differences between intentional and unintentional ambiguity so he can "find a meaningful

⁸Paul Hunsinger, Communicative Interpretation (Dubuque; Wm. C. Brown Company, 1967), pp. 85-86.

whole and . . . interpret the meanings he has discovered" (p. 86). Unfortunately, Hunsinger declines to suggest specific ways to interpret and perform these meanings. Hunsinger thus represents the mainstream of textbooks which refer only to verbal ambiguity as it functions as an integral part of poetry. Further, he equates the term "ambiguity" with the more generalized concept of multiple meanings and levels of meanings in words. And as we will note throughout our discussion of these textbooks, scholars in the field of oral interpretation primarily consider levels of meaning related to the concept of ambiguity.

Smith and Linn⁹ follow suit in discussing the equivocal nature of words (p. 32). By placing their discussion of ambiguity in the section titled "The word is sometimes equivocal" (p. 32), these authors differentiate ambiguity from implied meaning (pp. 34-38) and figurative meaning (pp. 38-46) which they discuss under separate headings. They further distinguish ambiguity from the pun and irony (pp. 32-33). As an illustration, they refer to the simple pun, which although undeniably "the lowest form of humor," (p. 32) is nevertheless a good means to "saying two things at once" (p. 32). They consider ambiguity a "related but subtler device" (p. 33). Irony, for instance, is not ambiguity according to Smith and Linn, but a device that occurs in literature when a context is manipulated

⁹Joseph F. Smith and James R. Linn, Skill in Reading Aloud (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), pp. 32-33, 39, 56-58.

so that "a unit means the contrary of what it ostensibly means" (p. 33, footnote). Ambiguity, on the other hand, "results when a context includes a unit with more than one meaning that fits the context. By capitalizing upon the fact that a word may be equivocal --or better, multivocal--a writer can greatly enrich a passage" (p. 33). Thus they limit the term "ambiguity" to the sense of two or more simultaneous meanings operating in a single word or context.

They also generally discuss and distinguish between artistic and inartistic ambiguity, (p. 33) terms which seem to parallel Hunsinger's intentional and unintentional ambiguity:

If it seems surprising that you were penalized for ambiguity in your freshman compositions and are now urged to admire it in literature, perhaps we should try to distinguish between artistic and inartistic ambiguity. What you were alleged to have done was to insert into your composition a term one of whose senses disrupted the context. When read one way, your term made the wrong kind of sense; at the very least it blurred the meaning of the passage instead of making it sharper. Since expository prose aims not only to be easily understood but also to eliminate any possible misunderstanding, your ambiguity need not have been very serious in order to blur the meaning. Most literature, however, is concerned less with the avoidance of misunderstanding than with the unification of widely disparate elements. Ordinarily it tries to compress a wealth of ideas into the shortest possible time; hence it often "says two things at once," using ambiguous terms whose multiple meanings contribute to the context (p. 33).

Artistic ambiguity, then, they laud as a good quality of literature. As an example of the value of ambiguity in literature they cite the lines ". . . all at once, I saw a crowd, / A host, of golden daffodils." in which the word "host" gives depth to an otherwise straightforward statement:

Insofar as it means "a large number" it merely restates the idea of "crowd"; but let us discuss . . . additional meanings . . . which allow the word to be used in the contexts "an armed host" Inasmuch as an armed host may be dangerous, the poem has introduced a misleading ambiguity; but inasmuch as an armed host is a fine spectacle, a parade, the meaning may reinforce that of "golden," and the ambiguity is valuable (pp. 33-34).

Ambiguity, then, according to Smith and Linn, is positive when used in literature but is negative in expository prose because it can cause confusion.

In like manner, Parrish,¹⁰ Lee,¹¹ and Cobin¹² discuss ambiguity in terms of verbal symbols and images of poetry. In the strict Empsonian tradition, Parrish states that "(Ambiguity here means not that the meaning is doubtful or uncertain, but that there is more than one legitimate meaning)."¹³ Lee discusses ambiguity in analyzing the Emily Dickinson poem "I Felt a Funeral" where she suggests several possible interpretations for that poem:

We are given time to develop the complexity suggested here, our focus sharpened by the mourners going to and fro and by the sound they make "treading-treading." We are then returned to sensation in the last line of the first stanza. Two suggested interpretations of this line, rather than being contradictory, provide a thin thread of suspense, strengthened by "till it seemed." On one level

¹⁰Wayland Maxfield Parrish, Reading Aloud, 3d ed. (New York: The Ronald Press Company, 1953), pp. 294, 251-53.

¹¹Charlotte I. Lee, Oral Interpretation, 4th ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1971), pp. 13-14.

¹²Martin Cobin, Theory and Technique of Interpretation (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1959), pp. 115, 139-40.

¹³Parrish, p. 294.

"Sense" may be taken to mean the mind bending under the strain of the "treading." This interpretation is strongly suggested by "Brain" in the opening line. But Miss Dickinson may also mean that awareness -- "Sense" -- had become so acute that the sensation was unbearable. These two interpretations are not mutually exclusive, and both can well operate here in a deliberate and disturbing ambiguity (p. 13).

We might consider the last sentence of Miss Lee's observation as an example of conjunctive ambiguity although she does not use that term.

In analyzing the final line of the poem, Lee discusses how levels of meaning, which she seems to equate with multiple meanings, can create ambiguity:

The last line, like several of the others, carries deliberate ambiguity and moves on more than one level. "Got through" may mean finished knowing in the human manner, as well as broke through into a superhuman or mystical knowledge possible only after death or a great spiritual crisis. The "--then--" functions on more than one level also. It completes the chronological progression; it terminates the immediate recorded experience; it teases us with a hint that there was more. A skilled interpreter can convey this multiplicity of meanings to his audience (p. 14).

Like others we have noted and will note, Lee contends that the performer can convey this multiplicity of meanings to his audience though she offers no guidelines as to how.

Lee's discussion of deliberate ambiguity relates to Hunsinger's discussion of intentional and unintentional ambiguity and Smith and Linn's discussion of artistic and inartistic ambiguity:

During the discussion of Miss Dickinson's poem we mentioned the term "deliberate ambiguity." Ambiguity is sometimes confused with lack of clarity, but the term as it is used in modern literary criticism means "having more than one possible meaning, all of which are relevant and congruent within the organic whole of the piece

of writing." Ambiguity may result in some obscurity, but it must not defy careful study or split the literary selection into incompatible segments. The kind of ambiguity we have been discussing is one of the richest sources of suggestion for the very reason that it does not narrowly circumscribe the experience of the poem (p. 14).

When Lee uses the term "suggestion" here, she does not mean "implication" but, rather, is referring to one of her three "touchstones" for judging all literature.¹⁴ Again we see the trend continued which states that ambiguity as an artistic literary device engendering multiple meaning is good, whereas that ambiguity which merely causes confusion is bad.

Cobin, too, uses the term "ambiguity" in the verbal sense of the word in his discussion of poetry. Like the others, his definition describes ambiguity as multiple meanings in words: "that quality of language which makes it possible to convey more than one message at a time" (p. 115) and where "the poet has expressed two concepts with one term" (p. 115). As an illustration, he uses the Dylan Thomas poem "A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London":

Dylan Thomas speaks of "a grave truth." The meaning of grave is ambiguous. It can mean serious or somber. At the same time, it can refer to the actual grave in which the body is being placed. This ambiguity may lead one to censure the language as lacking in precision. On the other hand, the very lack of precision in this instance may be considered an example of the richness of poetic style. There are two possibilities and both of them apply. Therefore, the poet has expressed two concepts with one term,

¹⁴See Lee, pp. 8-9.

which is being very expressive indeed. There is no need to settle for all time, in this discussion, the role or validity of ambiguity. What is important is the realization that the acceptance of ambiguity increases rather than lessens the interpreter's task of literary analysis (p. 115).

He warns us, however, that "Ambiguity is not a justification for a vague understanding. To the contrary, proper appreciation of ambiguity necessitates a precise understanding of each of the possibilities" (p. 115). And because ambiguity increases the interpreter's job of analysis, it poses special problems in terms of performance itself.¹⁵

Bacon¹⁶ and Aggertt and Bowen¹⁷ similarly discuss ambiguity in terms of multiple meanings in literature. Bacon's discussion arises in his section dealing with devices to create tensiveness in language:

Literature makes use of language that is often a strong departure from the language of everyday life. It is often more figurative, connotative, tight, dense, sharply patterned. The locus is often startlingly subtle and complex. The language may range from a very open, loose texture to a close, tight texture. Ambiguities in language are often functional, and two meanings are sometimes better than one. (This is not an argument for simple confusion; ambiguity may function to increase clarity when a deliberate ambivalence is required as the perspective of the work.) A literary piece may gain in effectiveness by the deliberate employment of vaguely defined views and sensations, provided always that the point is itself clear (p. 198).

¹⁵Cobin, p. 139. This topic will be discussed below pp. 98-106.

¹⁶Wallace A. Bacon, The Art of Interpretation, 3d ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1979), pp. 12, 115-16, 198.

¹⁷Otis J. Aggertt and Elbert R. Bowen. Communicative Reading, 3d ed. (New York: Macmillan Company, 1972), pp. 156-57, 402-03; see also Elbert R. Bowen, Otis J. Aggertt, and William E. Rickert, Communicative Reading, 4th ed. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1978), pp. 148-55, 365-68.

He does not clarify whether he considers vagueness and ambivalence as kinds of ambiguity or whether he views vagueness, ambivalence and ambiguity as devices to create tensiveness in language.

Aggertt and Bowen, like so many others, discuss ambiguity in their chapter devoted to poetry; their main discussion arises in terms of verbal and not narrative ambiguity. For them, complex poetry frequently contains meanings which may be ambiguous and obscure:

We have more than once suggested that poetry tends to be complex. At its best it is symbolic, containing more meanings than meet the casual eye. These meanings may be ambiguous and obscure We live in such a utilitarian world that when a writer skillfully obscures and mixes his meanings, we tend to find him disturbingly uncommunicative

Why is poetry ambiguous and obscure? . . . we contend that every good thing in life has to be worked at or worked for to be appreciated The best of literature may at times be frustratingly difficult to fathom but also correspondingly rewarding to one who makes the effort.

This is not to suggest that simple poems may not be good poems or that obscurity is in itself a virtue; rather, it is to say that complex human experiences cannot be fully expressed in simple language. For example, the experience of the young man caught in the following incident could not possibly be expressed simply. A young college couple are walking on a spring evening in good spirits, joking about nothing in particular. Suddenly, for no apparent reason, he spouts a line of poetry, "For each man kills the thing he loves . . ." and the young lady for no apparent reason immediately becomes hysterical with uncontrollable violent sobbing. He helps her home. Still sobbing, she leaves him at the door, making no explanation. How would you venture to communicate simply his emotional state and mental confusion about her mysterious behavior? From this, we can perhaps see that reasonable ambiguity and obscurity are to be appreciated for their contribution to forceful communication of significant experience to perceptive readers and listeners. Like real life, real literature is seldom simple.

The valid question does arise, however, about the feasibility of communicating ambiguous or obscure meanings to audiences (pp. 402-03).

Note how frequently they pair the terms ambiguous and obscure though they never clarify whether the ambiguity refers to multiple meanings or obscurity (p. 402), whether the ambiguity causes the obscurity, or even if the two are separable. The subsequent definition of ambiguity again points to the apparent bond between it and multiple meaning in which they define ambiguity as "--the device of saying more than one thing at once with one set of words--" (p. 403).

Further, Agger and Bowen continue the trend we have observed in Hunsinger, Smith and Linn, and Lee in referring to intentional versus unintentional ambiguity where the intentional ambiguity acts as a positive artistic device of the literature and where unintentional ambiguity refers to an inartistic lack of clarity:

If meaning is "ambiguous" in the worst sense, it must be cleared up for the listener. But ambiguity in the best sense--the device of saying more than one thing at once with one set of words--is to be found in abundance in great poetry (p. 403).

Similarly, in their discussion of J. P. Donleavy's short story "One for Yes" they, unlike the other scholars of oral interpretation, mention that in a narrative: "(The author may have intentionally been ambiguous--a desirable quality, not a fault, in good literature.)" (p. 156).

Bacon and Breen¹⁸ discuss ambiguity in a chapter devoted to the appreciation of language in literature. In their discussion

¹⁸Wallace A. Bacon and Robert S. Breen, Literature as Experience (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1959), pp. 187-88.

the authors discuss ambiguity as multiple meanings in terms of being negative or positive:

Literature is not successful when it simply confuses (though the reader has some obligation to suspend judgment until he is sure the confusion is not simply a result of his own laziness or inadequacy as a reader). Even a poem or a play or a story about a state of confusion must have clarity in the vision of confusion it presents. That is, ambiguity which results simply from inept use of language must be charged against the writer. But there are ambiguities in writing which serve enormously to increase the effectiveness of the thing written; statements which can be taken two different ways (or three or four different ways) may depend for their effect precisely upon the complex of meanings. In Joyce's "The Sisters" (Dubliners), when Eliza, one of the sisters of the old priest who has died, says, "The duties of the priesthood was too much for him. And then his life was, you might say, crossed," she is using the word crossed to mean "disappointed," but Joyce is using it in another sense: the old priest has died under the burden of the cross, and the chalice which ought to represent thanksgiving and renewal rests upon his breast, as he lies in his coffin, as if it were the instrument of his death (pp. 187-88).

Thus Bacon and Breen continue the trend of dichotomizing ambiguity as intentional or unintentional. When intentional, they say, ambiguity is a device which increases the density of the material:

Modern literature in particular depends heavily upon layers of meaning which frequently use ambiguity as a device for increasing the density of the experience being imitated. It would be almost impossible here to do justice to the complexity of the subject. William Empson has written, in Seven Types of Ambiguity, what is perhaps the standard discussion of the subject, though he seems to some critics to labor the point a little too hard. Well used, ambiguities in literature function much as do overtones in music, extending the range of the experience being communicated (p. 188).

They conclude their discussion of ambiguity by noting that intentional ambiguity can be found in all literature even if it is on the level of the simple pun:

Ambiguities thus used are to be found in all literatures. On the simplest level, ambiguity may be expressed in the pun, or play on words--though we do not mean to suggest that all puns are simple (p. 188).

Bacon and Breen's discussion of ambiguity parallels those of Hunsinger, Lee, Smith and Linn, and Aggertt and Bowen in that they say ambiguity generally refers to multiple meanings whether intentional or not.

Allusions to Verbal Ambiguity

Some texts do not discuss ambiguity per se, but allude to the concept through generalized comments about linguistic devices of poetry. Paul Campbell,¹⁹ for instance, nowhere uses the term ambiguity, but in discussing poetry says that poets frequently "use language in a way that involves two or more simultaneous meanings" (p. 9). Similarly, Dolman²⁰ alludes to the concept sometimes discussed with ambiguity in his section called "Suggestion and Implication in Poetry" (pp. 174-77). Here, he says poetry has the quality of "indirectness" and the poet chooses his words "obliquely" (p. 175). In this way, Dolman seems aware of the particular device in poetry that some people discuss with ambiguity though that label never appears.

¹⁹Paul N. Campbell, Oral Interpretation (New York: Macmillan Company, 1966), p. 9.

²⁰John Dolman, Jr., The Art of Reading Aloud (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1956), pp. 174-77.

Mattingly and Grimes²¹ discuss poetry in terms of levels of meaning (pp. 81-85) and connotation (p. 69). Connotations, they say, are "fringes of meaning" (p. 69), a phrase immediately reminiscent of Wheelwright's concept of "soft focus." When a reader first reads a passage, Mattingly and Grimes say he may discover "the literal or first level of meaning . . . ; this level is called [the] basic, primary, or explicit meaning" (p. 81), and the complex section requires repeated readings to uncover the multiple or "depth" meanings.

Haas,²² too, in discussing the selection of quality literature for performances in readers theatre, discusses obscurities, nuances, and multiple meanings in literature:²³ "Surely, any experienced performer knows how obscurities in literature can be clarified in performances, as well as how nuances and multiple meanings can be created by performance" (p. 4). However, he does not explain this statement.

²¹Alethea Smith Mattingly and Wilma H. Grimes, Interpretation: Writer, Reader, Audience, 2d ed. (Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1970), pp. 69, 81-85.

²²Richard Haas, Theatres of Interpretation (Ann Arbor: Roberts-Burton, 1976), pp. 4, 11-12.

²³Haas, unlike the other authors cited above, does later include mention of ambiguities. Since his discussion relates to the actual performance of literature, we will save an examination of his mention until that section of this study.

Confusion of Terms

A common weakness of several texts is the confusion of ambiguity with other cognates. Parrish, for example, who uses the term to mean plurivocality or multiple meanings in words, also suggests that a reader's inability to decipher an "ambiguity" may be the fault of the writer for not making himself "readily understood" and therefore his "poem is not suitable for reading aloud, . . ." (p. 251). This statement indicates that he uses the term in two different ways, as denoting vagueness in the evaluative sense of the word, and multiple meaning in the Empsonian tradition.²⁴

Beloof²⁵ devotes a section to ambiguity in his chapter on "tone":

Ambiguity is, in all its developments, a duality or plurality of perception. A pun is a verbal duality which may be used for quite lovely as well as quite dismaying effects. It is no accident that both Shakespeare and your neighbor, who is incapable of any verbal subtlety at all, are fond of the pun. For the truth is that nothing can be more subtle, and few things more tedious, than the perception of ambiguity, whether verbal or emotional. Well used, the verbal ambiguity can be simply a detail. Thus, when Keats addressed the Grecian Urn as "O Attic Shape! Fair attitude! with brede/ Of marble men and maidens overwrought," he means both brede--a border, an embroidery--and, if we will, breed--a race of men. So the pun makes the phrase mean both an embroidery or border of marble men and women. . . Similarly, overwrought means "wrought over," that is, a border worked onto the vase. It also means "over-excited," and on this level reminds us that the people on the vase, who are portrayed as taking part in a ceremony are in an emotionally heightened condition (p. 156).

²⁴I consider his explanation to indicate confusion because he does not specifically differentiate intentional from unintentional ambiguities.

²⁵Robert Beloof, The Performing Voice in Literature (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1966), pp. 156-61.

He further mentions puns as one form of ambiguity:

Puns used so are marvelously economical means of achieving at once richness of statement and syntactic simplicity. Notice how unobtrusive they are here, how, in a sense, it is not necessary to see the two levels of meaning for basic communication to take place. Yet how much more rewarding the lines are if we are aware of these possibilities (pp. 156-57).

He goes on to give an example of a pun as a keystone in Waller's poem "Go Lovely Rose":

On the other hand a pun may stand as a keystone in a poem.

. . . .

In this poem the word "suffer" is ambiguous. In Waller's day it carried not only our sense of "to endure hardship," but perhaps most frequently then meant simply "to permit, to allow." So Waller is saying, "Tell her to permit herself to be desired." But he also implies, by choosing this word, that he is aware that such an action on her part will not be easy, will be painful, will be something to endure. Many things contribute toward making this a fine poem, but the poem's poignancy, its depth of humanity, spreads outward from this pun, wherein the poet delicately makes clear his awareness of the price of what he asks and of his care for her. In a poem deliberately conventional in its artifice, it is this word more than any other that strikes the deeper resonances of reality (p. 157).

Then, deviating from traditional discussions of verbal ambiguity, he discusses paradox as a special kind of ambiguity:

Paradox is a particular kind of ambiguity presenting two apparently impossibly conflicting possibilities which are yet somehow resolved. The purposes of a paradox is [sic] usually to force us to synthesize the problem on a higher level of experience (p. 157).

Beloof also discusses what he calls emotional ambiguity which closely aligns with what we have defined as ambivalence or duality and

polarization of feelings. He calls these "massive ambiguities of the human situation that are so often a part of the larger insights with which great writers concern themselves" (p. 158). He points to the James Joyce story "Eveline" as an example of emotional ambiguity in the character causing a split in her own psyche and renders her helpless to fulfill her desires (p. 158). This, however, more precisely refers to speaker ambivalence and not ambiguity.

Apparently, then, oral interpretation textbooks tend to discuss only verbal ambiguity as it functions in literature, whether or not they label it ambiguity. Most texts concur regarding the uses, importance, and overall definition of ambiguity (as being multiple meaning). Many of the textbooks dichotomize ambiguity into some form of intentional and unintentional (artistic, inartistic, deliberate, etc.) where the intentional ambiguity serves as an artistic device which enhances the literature and where the unintentional ambiguity serves only to confuse and thus hurts the literature. A few textbooks, however, have devoted brief discussions to narrative ambiguity, though those that do never use that precise label. Perhaps this continued emphasis on verbal ambiguity parallels the interests of literary critics. Certainly, Empson's tradition of linguistic analysis of poetry became entrenched in literary circles during the thirties and forties and continues even today. Research and attention to the narrative, however, is only now passing from its infancy to more mature stages.²⁶ If we compare journal articles in either

²⁶See, for example, the dates on Formalism and Structuralism

the fields of literary criticism or oral interpretation from a fifteen year period in the fifties to those of the last fifteen years, we will undoubtedly notice how few articles focused on the narrative in the earlier period. Beginning in the fifties in the field of the performance of literature, we find more articles dealing with aesthetics of performance and performance as a means of discovering the text. Because this emphasis on performance as a legitimate mode of literary criticism has increased, scholars in the field are paying more attention to specific genres of literature and the special problems each raises.

Narrative Ambiguity

A few newer textbooks do appear at least to allude to the concept of narrative ambiguity. Generally, the discussion is the briefest possible allusion to ambiguity at the level of applied criticism and not in a broadly defined theoretical framework. The third edition of Aggertt and Bowen, for instance, alludes to and describes a type of narrative ambiguity in the explanation of the Donleavy short story "One for Yes." In fact, although they discuss verbal ambiguity and obscurity as a characteristic of poetry in another section of the book, (pp. 402-03) in their exegeses of this story, they describe ambiguity of the disjunctive type:

Beyond the mere happenings just described, the story stirs up at least two quite divergent interpretations. (The author may have intentionally been ambiguous--a desirable quality, not a fault, in good literature.) In the first interpretation, the narrator is thought to be pretending an inability to speak normally and is playing

a rude game with his adversary in answering all questions with either one "beep" for "yes," or two for "no," eventually adding a third "beep" for "thanks," and a fourth for meanings not made obvious by the context. In a second interpretation, the narrator is thought to have suffered an actual illness or accident that really prevents him from conversing in any other way than by beeping (pp. 156-57).

The authors then proceed to explain the reasons for each of the two interpretations and the ensuing "higher meaning" when the interpretations conjoin. Ultimately, they reject either interpretation as "the sole meaning of the story," (p. 157) since the author includes the ambiguity in order to stimulate "the reader to more complex responses than a simple story would provide. Accepting both basic meanings concurrently gives us the pleasure-pain experience so characteristic of black humor" (p. 157). Here, then, they describe disjunctive narrative ambiguity. Further, their brief discussion indicates their feelings as to the desirable quality of both verbal and narrative ambiguity in literature (p. 156).

A second text alluding to narrative ambiguity is that of Wallace Bacon. In discussing "spots of indeterminacy"²⁷ Bacon reveals himself to be more and more influenced by phenomenology, a discipline which regards literature as a type of real-life experience. Like Aggertt and Bowen, Bacon does not discuss "spots of indeterminacy" in regards to ambiguity, but because spots are like gaps and gaps are an important device for creating narrative ambiguity, his

²⁷Bacon, p. 115.

discussion is relevant.²⁸ Not all gaps, though, cause ambiguity. In discussing the text and body as acts (p. 12), Bacon points out that a reader must "fill in details not literally supplied by the author":

All readers fill in details from clues presented by the author; so long as they do not run counter to the text, such additions are a natural and useful part of the actuation or realization of the language. In this sense, you as reader become a participant in the writing of the poem, and your contribution will always be in some ways distinct from that made by other readers. It is because readers value their own contributions to stories that publishers have generally foregone, nowadays, the once-common practice of illustrating novels. Illustrations often violated reader responses (p. 12).

Bacon comes close to recognizing that gaps in characters may create ambiguity when he acknowledges the validity of divergent interpretations:

We create our own pictures of them [characters] from details in the text, but pictures differ from reader to reader. If the differences result from readers' ignoring of things specified in the text, we may say that the differences are not defensible; if, however, the text is taken carefully into account, two readers may still fill in the "spots of indeterminacy" in rather different ways. Both pictures will be valid. That is one reason why novelists nowadays do not have illustrations in their books. Novels reprinted after they have been filmed sometimes have pictures from the film included in the text; such pictures may in an unfortunate way tie the reader to the specific details with which the film has filled in the "open" spaces. Our sense of a character in reading may be very different from the film personality who has created the character in the film (p. 116).

²⁸See Chapter IV below for further explanation of gaps.

However, to fit the definition of ambiguity posited in this study, both interpretations that Bacon calls valid would have to exist simultaneously. Unless these interpretations somehow coexisted while remaining different (like "overwrought" in Beloof's example) or contradicted each other while coexisting, they would not qualify as ambiguity. Though Bacon does not extend his discussion that far, his remarks seem pertinent enough to use in this study.

The Performance of Ambiguity

The most prominent discussion of the performance of ambiguity appears in a series of articles by Katharine Loesch, Samuel Levin, and Seymour Chatman.²⁹ Between 1956 and 1973 this series of articles appeared in major scholarly journals which apparently stimulated interest in the possibilities of performing ambiguous literature. All of these articles dealt solely with the performance of verbal ambiguity in poetry. However, because of the overlap between narrative and linguistic ambiguity, we might profit from a brief examination of the bases of this "debate." The roots of the discussion began with the 1952 publication of Arnold Stein's "Donne's Prosody" in which Stein used two examples from Donne to illustrate what he called "a kind of

²⁹Katharine T. Loesch, "Literary Ambiguity and Oral Performance," Quarterly Journal of Speech 51 (October 1965): 258-67; Samuel R. Levin, "Suprasegmentals and the Performance of Poetry," Quarterly Journal of Speech 48 (December 1962): 366-72; Seymour Chatman, "Mr. Stein on Donne," Kenyon Review 53 (Summer 1956): 443-51.

ambiguous hovering."³⁰ Even though Stein was not talking about performance, his article stimulated a response by Seymour Chatman. With his background in linguistics, Chatman argued that intonations of the English language forced disambiguation of equivocal words:

Nor can I agree with Mr. Stein that the metrical ambiguity of another line in the poem contributes metaphorically to the whole; I believe this ambiguity too demands a resolution in oral performance. It is a paper ambiguity only. . . . My major point is that this ambiguity, in terms of the sound the line will assume, is more apparent than real. The mind may persist, but the voice is required to make a choice between the alternatives by the very structure of the language. . . . The voice has no mechanism for "hovering," . . . The very act of performance more often than not forces the reader to resolve ambiguities, to decide between alternatives; where performance does require a decision, we can only conclude that the ambiguity is mainly textual--that is, it inheres in the inadequacies of the English writing system in representing intonation patterns, and not in the structure of the poem as a sequence of English vocal signals. . . . Many textual ambiguities cannot be preserved in oral performances, simply because the stress-pitch-juncture system of English demands a resolution (pp. 447-50).

These two articles proved to be a catalyst to several responses. In Samuel Levin's "Suprasegmentals and the Performance of Poetry," he supports Chatman and further argues that "resolution of . . . ambiguity represents not a service to a poem, but a disservice" (p.367). He favors performance which sustains ambiguity and ultimately concludes that "visual performance" (or the silent reading) is the only mode of performance able to sustain the ambiguity (p. 369),

³⁰ Arnold Stein, "Donne's Prosody," Kenyon Review 18 (Summer 1965, reprint ed., Kenyon Review, Spring 1951): 439-43.

Three years later Katharine T. Loesch provided an answer to Levin and Chatman in her article "Literary Ambiguity and Oral Performance." In it she argues that it is possible for an interpreter to preserve ambiguity in poetry by calling upon what she has labeled the "non-disambiguating intonation" (p. 260). She then supports her contention with example after example of ambiguous lines of poetry in which she linguistically diagrams how vocal intonation may preserve the ambiguity. Loesch never suggests an expressionless performance to preserve ambiguity. Instead, she insists that there are available to the performer legitimate intonation patterns that preserve ambiguity. The debate ostensibly came to an end with the publication of Chatman's response to Loesch and her subsequent reply.³¹

Generally, textbooks follow suit and discuss performance of ambiguity in terms of whether or not to "disambiguate" the ambiguity. The third edition of Aggertt and Bowen offers rather vague suggestions for performing ambiguity in poetry:

Traditionally, the speaker tries to make clear the meanings behind words. If meaning is "ambiguous" in the worst sense, it must be cleared up for the listener. But ambiguity in the best sense--the device of saying more than one thing at once with one set of words--is to be found in abundance in great poetry. Must we, as oral interpreters succeed in communicating at once all the possible meanings that a silent reader may eventually find in the lines after hours of scrutiny? Some scholars insist that if ambiguity exists in a poem, then any "reading" of that poem that communicates only one meaning (disambiguates) does the poem a disservice.

³¹Seymour Chatman, "On 'The Intonational Fallacy,'" Quarterly Journal of Speech 52 (October 1966): 283-86; Katharine T. Loesch, "Response," Quarterly Journal of Speech 52 (October 1966): 286-89.

Your authors react negatively to such a contention. An oral interpreter is an interpretative artist, and, within the limits of ethical responsibility and good scholarship, he is entitled to his "interpretation." (Many different Hamlets have legitimately been brought to life on the stage.) Ambiguity in literature can be rewarding, but a deliberate effort to read with sufficient inexpressiveness to preserve ambiguity seems inconsistent with the communicative purpose of the interpretative arts (p. 403).

Thus they support the view that each individual's "interpretation" need not transmit all the manifest meanings of ambiguity in performance. Such an attempt to preserve absolutely the ambiguity, they say, may render the performance inexpressive.

In the most recent revision of this text,³² although the discussion of narrative ambiguity regarding "One for Yes" is virtually the same,³³ they do, however, alter their view of disambiguating ambiguity in performance. Earlier they did not recognize the connection between the rewards of narrative ambiguity and verbal ambiguity. In discussing poetry, they state that "The oral reader who does not perceive ambiguity, or who chooses to disregard that element in a poem, reduces its meanings, thereby lessening its potential impact on an audience."³⁴ They then go on to discuss the feasibility of communicating ambiguity to audiences:

³²Bowen, Aggertt, and Rickert.

³³Compare Aggertt and Bowen, pp.156-57 with Bowen, Aggertt, and Rickert, pp. 148-49.

³⁴Bowen, Aggertt, and Rickert, p. 366.

The valid question does arise, however, about the feasibility of communicating ambiguous or obscure meanings to audiences. To expect instant communicative success with literature requiring several silent readings for understanding seems unrealistic at best. Well, of course, that is a function of the interpreter: to probe the depths of meaning and find the means for making possible at least a partial understanding and appreciation in the listener. Good oral interpretation can send the listener back to the written poem with an increased capacity to understand and appreciate it, even when communication of full meaning is impossible. The oral interpreter's insights, enthusiasm, and informative remarks hopefully lead to understanding and eventual appreciation by the audience. The interpreter's introduction to the reading of an obscure poem is especially important preparation for insightful reading. And, of course, we should never underestimate the power of the expressive human voice, face, and body to communicate meanings that may not be transparent.

Traditionally, the speaker tries to make clear the meanings behind words. If meaning is "ambiguous" in the worst sense, it must be cleared up for the listener. But ambiguity in the best sense--the device of saying more than one thing at once with one set of words--is to be found in abundance in great poetry. It is unlikely that an oral interpreter will succeed in communicating at once all the possible meanings that a silent reader may eventually find in the lines after hours of scrutiny. Some attempts to do so may result, not in exciting multiplicities of meaning, but in confusion. On the other hand, there is no excuse for diluting a complex poem into a superficial clarity.

Well, then, how can an interpreter give more than one meaning in the same utterance? This is an easy question to answer if we return to our definition of meaning as response. The interpreter does not give meanings but, rather, elicits responses (meanings) from an audience. The successful reading often preserves the possibility of multiple meanings so that they can be realized by attentive listeners. A deliberately inexpressive recitation that allows for any meaning or meanings is inconsistent with the communicative purposes of interpretation. But, a controlled performance that is responsive to simultaneous connotations of idea and feeling encourages a similarly productive ambiguity in the listener,³⁵

³⁵Bowen, Aggertt, and Rickert, pp. 366-67.

The book no longer reflects the view that inexpressiveness is the only way to preserve ambiguity in performance.

Of the textbooks reviewed, Cobin's regards ambiguity as an element of style which the interpreter can perform but Cobin notes the difficulty of preserving ambiguity:

Regarding ambiguity as an aspect of style, you have a special problem. In a sense, it is easier for the writer to be ambiguous. In interpretation, your speech tends to suggest one meaning rather than another. It is difficult for you to say several things at once. Experience has indicated that speakers find no difficulty in saying nothing or in being vague; but this is something quite different. Your interpretation can strive to suggest more than one meaning; or you may be forced to decide which of several meanings to reinforce. Vagueness is simply confusion for the listener, however, and is to be avoided (pp. 139-40).

He fails to suggest specific ways in which the reader may perform the ambiguities while simultaneously avoiding lapsing into vagueness.

Roloff,³⁶ Smith and Linn, and Haas openly oppose disambiguation of literature in performance. In a discussion of popular literature and great literature, Roloff maintains:

Popular literature, popular song, popular theatre, and popular entertainment characteristically capitalize upon what a great many people can empathize with. Conversely, genuinely great literature characteristically poses the potentialities of life most profoundly, if not always most sublimely. Popular literature, by its very nature, must have immediacy of impact, of accessibility--an easy accessibility that soon makes it grow pale and tiresome. Great literature, on the other hand, is richly evocative of growing life, of an unfolding life; its reaches are never fully plumbed or exhausted. For this reason great performances of great literature almost invariably restore the

³⁶Leland H. Roloff, The Perception and Evocation of Literature (Glenview: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1973), p. 72.

ambiguity of literature. The performances ask as many questions as does the literature itself. As the auditor/perceiver watches interpretive behavior in space, he may at first be puzzled or bewildered, then excited, and finally involved.

A definitive performance, in addition to being bountifully evocative of the source material, often provides a behavioral parallel. A student at the age of eighteen, for example, who approaches Hamlet or Ophelia may--depending upon the range of his or her life experiences--inform these characters skillfully, sometimes beautifully. Ten years later these same students will approach these characters with insights and experiences undreamed of earlier; and as performers they will, in all probability, demonstrate in their physical presences penetrative intuitions which will ambiguate their performances and which will almost surely add more mature behavioral dimensions. Of course, a definitive performance is always a mature act, regardless of the age of the performer (p. 72).

Smith and Linn at least imply that the performer should retain the ambiguity in his reading:

By capitalizing upon the fact that a word may be equivocal--or better, multivocal--a writer can greatly enrich a passage, and you will miss much if your interpretation restricts each word to a single meaning (p. 33).

However, they make no specific suggestions regarding the performance itself.

Haas in his text on group performance discusses obscurities in literature:

Surely, any experienced performer knows how obscurities in literature can be clarified in performance, as well as how nuances and multiple meanings can be created by performance. But try as we may, some aspects of literature simply **cannot** be conveyed in one sitting. That doesn't mean that we must avoid complex literature for simple literature that appears to be more easily staged. Let's not be simple-minded. Some pieces appear more like puzzles, and it takes time to absorb their entirety. Surely the materials to be grasped by the ear are somewhat limited by the vocabulary the ear is accustomed to--a smaller

vocabulary than the one possessed by the eye. An oral performance denies an audience the opportunity to proceed at its own pace; and denied that privilege, an audience may not be able to assimilate and appreciate some selections. Adapting a performance to your audience's listening skills will certainly assist the communicative clarity of your production, but don't expect to communicate everything to everyone in one production! Thankfully the theatres of interpretation do not compete with the silent reader, who can read at his leisure, at his own pace, and in isolation, with time to reread, ponder, and even use a dictionary. People who would never read Eliot's "The Waste Land" often make it a point to attend a performance of the poem because they know an effort has been made to clarify its complexity. Surely the audiences of Shakespearean productions don't spend their evenings mulling over the plays--they, too, trust to the production for their understanding and enjoyment. Audiences tend to expect some sense of communicative integrity and wise directors guide their productions toward an eventual presentational clarity (p. 4.)

Further, in discussing the oral dimension of readers theatre performances, Haas points out that in any performance of literature, some losses of meaning must inevitably occur:

No one can completely perceive the oral dimension of printed literature. But respond we must, for no other reason than to understand one's point of departure; and, as Wallace Bacon would have it, one's point of return.

All of us in interpretation fondly extol the virtues of the oral dimension, the gains we exact in the performance of literature. But we concede some inevitable losses. . . .

Written language can possess dimensions of multiple meaning that are easily lost in oral performance. And while assertions abound that the voice can avoid the loss of intentional ambiguities, it is also clear that only one meaning can be performed at one time. And although audiences and performers alike know that multiple meanings can be evoked in listeners because of the one meaning selected to be performed, the nature of multiple meanings in silent reading is probably more simultaneous in effect than the nature of multiple meanings in performance. And the difference is not, as we often think, solely a matter of performance; it distinctly includes the capacities of listening too. . . . But before performance seems incapable of multiple meanings, let's change focus and assure you that literature is filled

with potentials for sub-textual meanings and artistic ambiguities that only the ear can perceive and only the voice and body can convey (pp. 12-13).

Because our goal in performance is to "fulfill the responsibilities of oralization evoked by the literature we choose," (p. 13), Haas says our performance must include "vocal inflections and bodily attitudes . . . that the casual reading of words may not make clear or sufficiently subtle in meaning" (p. 13). However, he does not clarify or elaborate on the statement.

Clearly scholars have largely ignored narrative ambiguity. To date, only two studies exist which deal exclusively with narrative ambiguity.³⁷ These, however, are out of the field of oral interpretation and are thus limited in scope in terms of implications for the performance of narrative literature. One unpublished study in the field of speech communication theory by Ernest J. Parkin, Jr. examines literary ambiguity in the sense of multiple meanings.³⁸ His dissertation, however, was not concerned with the performance of literature. Instead, he asserted that scholars could improve their overall understanding of ambiguity by combining literary evaluation of ambiguity and communication theory evaluation.

Summary

Narrative ambiguity functions as an integral element of much of today's literature. Though it overlaps with linguistic ambiguity

³⁷Ralf Norrman, "Techniques of Ambiguity in the Fiction of Henry James," Acta Academia Aboensis, Humaniora, ser. A, 53 (1977); 1-197; Shlomith Rimmon, The Concept of Ambiguity--the Example of James. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977).

³⁸Ernest J. Parkin, Jr., "Ambiguity in Literary and Communication Theory." Ph.D. dissertation, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, 1974.

in terms of the responses it fosters in the reader, it ultimately functions in a unique manner. A review of past and present literature in the field of oral interpretation reveals little information of significance dealing with narrative ambiguity. Most discussions focus on semantic ambiguity in traditional ways. Although scholars more often than not neglect this concept in literature of the field of the performance of literature, it nevertheless remains important because of its fostering of mutual creation of text by reader and author. Certainly, this phenomenon has striking resemblance to what can occur in the performer-audience process of performing literature, and as a result, performers should give the concept attention.

The next chapter will focus on a discussion of specific devices used to create ambiguity in narrative literature. Chapter V will consider the ways in which performance can preserve and feature narrative ambiguity. The final two chapters will then focus on the works of John Hawkes as they provide examples of narrative ambiguity and the ways in which performance can feature those examples of ambiguity.

CHAPTER IV

DEVICES OF NARRATIVE AMBIGUITY

Although similar to the semantic kind, narrative ambiguity operates in a unique manner within the structure of the narrative. Ideally, we should base any theories regarding narrative ambiguity on universally recognized theories of the narrative form. But as Rimmon points out no such theories regarding the narrative exist:

Research into the nature of narrative or of the literary text in general is relatively young and has not yet reached conclusive results. There exists, therefore, no unified body of definitions and distinctions on which we can base a demarcation of the components of narrative ambiguity.¹

Of the two existing studies concerned solely with narrative ambiguity, Rimmon's draws from the theories of the French and Russian schools of Structuralism and Formalism in order to have consistent units amenable to analysis of ambiguity.² The other study deals specifically with ambiguity in the later works of Henry James and draws from no particular theory of literature. Instead, author Ralf Norrman examines specific Jamesian "devices of ambiguity" in hopes that his study "of ambiguity in an individual author may perhaps also

¹Shlomith Rimmon, The Concept of Ambiguity--the Example of James (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), pp. 27-28.

²See preface in Rimmon.

contribute something to one's understanding of the nature and function of literary ambiguity in general."³ The present study will assert its own theories regarding ambiguity-creating devices, not inconsistent with, but less elaborate than these two cited studies. We will focus on prose fiction, and, for the most part, ignore drama, since the two genres have many different characteristics, notably the absence of point of view in drama, an important source of narrative ambiguity. In focusing on prose fiction we can thereby concentrate on elements necessary to understand and perform the work.

Traditionally, scholars approach the narrative in terms of large units of analysis--plot, character, setting, and point of view. We may similarly examine devices of narrative ambiguity in these terms. We will discuss semantic ambiguity only as it contributes to creating narrative ambiguity. Although most studies regarding ambiguity-creating devices grow out of discussions of Henry James, Herman Melville and other more traditional authors,⁴ we will learn in Chapters VI and VII that the principles and methods delineated in this chapter apply to other writers as well, in particular to the works of John Hawkes. Therefore, the subsequent portion of this chapter will delineate and examine special types of narrative within which ambiguity-creating devices can function, specific devices

³Ralf Norrman, "Techniques of Ambiguity in the Fiction of Henry James," Acta Academiae Aboensis, Humaniora, ser. A, 54 (1977) 12. Obviously, this study supports his statement,

⁴See complete bibliographies in Rimmon and Norrman,

of narrative ambiguity, and the ways in which these devices function within and emanate from plot, character, setting, and point of view.⁵

Devices of the "Inverted Story"

Rimmon identifies the inverted story⁶ which offers a basic narrative structure which encourages us to interpret the story one way until a surprise ending reveals startling information that compels us to revert to earlier parts of the story and reinterpret them in light of this new information. The inverted story utilizes narrative devices similar to those used to create ambiguity. In the inverted story the real meaning, which comes only at the end of the narrative, cancels out the initial meaning the reader attributed to the story. It is thus not ambiguous in and of itself, for in a truly ambiguous narrative, the reader faces two simultaneously coexisting interpretations, not a new one overriding an old. Nevertheless, the inverted story causes retrospection on the part of the reader, just as do some ambiguous narratives. In Thomas Tryon's novel The Other for instance, the reader recognizes the unreliability of the narrator only at the end of the novel and then must retrospectively reconstruct his interpretation so that it will be compatible with this new information. Every element of the narrative takes on different perspective because we now suspect unreliability. If the inverted story also happens to be ambiguous, the structure influences the

⁵Of course, these devices do not necessarily generate ambiguity, but we still need to consider all devices available to the author.

⁶Rimmon, pp. 81-83.

ambiguity because it forces the reader to reexamine his initial interpretation in light of the revelatory information presented at the story's end.

The techniques used to create the inverted story are similar to devices used in creating ambiguity. As a result, we need to examine the specific machinations of the inverted story. Generally, we establish the defining properties of the inverted story as:

1. The sequel or end of the inverted story cancels out the meaning the reader initially attached to the story.
2. The story's implications as revealed by the ending operate in complete opposition to the story's initial overtly stated meaning.
3. The story actively deceives the reader through manipulation of rhetorical devices and we can point to these devices that mislead the reader.
4. The author subtly hints at the real subject of the narrative from the outset.
5. The inversion which occurs functions at the level of discourse and thus organizes the compositional elements of the entire narrative.⁷

Though the inverted story may be ambiguous (as in the case of Henry James's "The Lesson of the Master"), it does not have to be.

⁷Rimmon, pp. 81-82. See below pp. 127-28 for a discussion of discourse.

The real difference between an ambiguous inverted story and a non-ambiguous one arises from the fact that in the former, a second interpretation suddenly arises at the story's end, whereas in the latter, the revelatory scene postulates a second interpretation which completely overrides the first interpretation. In true ambiguity, both interpretations must coexist and preclude choice of a "correct" one. But beyond this major difference, the non-ambiguous inverted story still exploits techniques frequently used to create an ambiguous story. Properties two through four above are all devices that the writer may actively employ in the truly ambiguous narrative. First, the writer must include the germ of the second interpretation in the story, whether covertly or overtly, from the beginning. If we examine James's "The Lesson of the Master" we see that the possibility that St. George deceives Paul in order to marry Miss Fancourt appears early in the story, although we do not actively realize it until the end. Further, this interpretation that arises only at the story's end contradicts our initial interpretation. Both these interpretations mutually exclude each other, and if we carefully examine the story, we can find clues which support both interpretations throughout and thus sustain the ambiguity to the end. Even at the story's end we cannot be sure which interpretation is correct. These devices of the inverted story, then, may also create ambiguity.

This type of narrative is closely akin to a type of ironic story that Wayne Booth discusses. Booth contends that ambiguity (unintentional) may result in a story when a lack of adequate warning

exists that irony is operating.⁸ It is important once again to realize that although irony may cause ambiguity, it is not itself ambiguity, since in an ironic story two narratives exist simultaneously in opposition to each other--one overtly stated and the other covertly implied. But ultimately with irony the reader faces no problem in deciding which version is "correct" if the ironic element is clear.

The reversal scene and the retrospective patterning of the parts preceding it comprise the two main elements of the inverted story. The reversal scene actually introduces the "twist" in the story that finally forces the reader to realize the incorrectness of his initial interpretation. In retrospective patterning, the clues prior to the reversal scene seem to indicate one specific interpretation.⁹ In reality, though, these clues can be simultaneously "read" in another way, the way which supports the new interpretation; this can occur, however, only after our exposure to the new information provided in the reversal scene. Tryon's The Other is a non-ambiguous inverted story.

In a true inverted story, any ambiguity is merely temporary and ultimately resolved once we reach the reversal scene. If the story were ambiguous in a disjunctive manner, the conflicting interpretations would continue to puzzle us because we would not be able to tell which interpretation is correct. With the inverted story, our aim in

⁸Wayne C. Booth, The Rhetoric of Fiction (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 316.

⁹Rimmon, p. 87.

rereading the retrospective patterning of clues prior to the reversal scene is "a projection of the reversal onto the rest of the story and a correction of our initial erroneous interpretation in its light."¹⁰ With the unresolved ambiguous narrative, our hope of solving the ambiguity motivates our retrospective perusal of searching for clues which would, according to Rimmon, "turn the scales in favor of one of the mutually exclusive interpretations" (p. 87). Thus the retrospectively ambiguous narrative relates to the inverted story; the difference between them rests in the fact that the ambiguity in the inverted story rises and is dispelled with the reversal scene, whereas the ambiguous retrospective story retains the ambiguity.

Prospective Arrangement of Ambiguity

Prospective ambiguity, a well-defined technique employed in many ambiguous narratives, forces a reader to search for clues of resolution from the beginning. Unlike retrospective ambiguity, which allows this search only as a result of the reversal scene, a prospectively ambiguous narrative reveals a gap quite early in the story with the rest of the narrative an attempt to fill in the missing information.¹¹ John Hawkes's Travesty exemplifies prospective ambiguity. In this dramatic monologue, we immediately encounter a first-person narrator who claims to be driving himself, his daughter, and his best friend to their deaths. The suspense arises as a result of

¹⁰Rimmon, p. 87.

¹¹Rimmon, p. 95.

the potential ambiguity as to whether or not the car will crash. The text introduces other ambiguities which intensify this major one (including the narrator's reliability and whether or not two other people are actually in the car, or even if there is a car at all). This ambiguity confronts us at the beginning of the novel with the remainder of the work providing clues to support or reject this ambiguity. We anticipate and search for clues because they are prospectively arranged. In this particular novel, the ambiguity remains because the novel ends before the car crashes.

One type of ambiguous narrative which uses prospective patterning of clues is the enigma narrative, a general term encompassing detective stories and mysteries. In the enigma narrative the ambiguity in most cases is ultimately resolved as it is in many inverted stories. Yet, because of the early introduction of a gap and other clues in the narrative, every clue that arises leads to and supports either temporary or permanent ambiguity:

The apparently random paraphernalia of the mystery can all be related if only we have the key. The form of the detective or spy story works towards the revelation of that essential linking clue. But in order to follow the narrative at all, we have to take it on trust that some transcendent logic of events does exist.¹²

Further, a fundamental rule of both the enigma narrative and the inverted story is that the germ of the resolution must exist in the

¹²Jonathan Raban, The Technique of Modern Fiction: Essays in Practical Criticism (Notre Dame; University of Notre Dame Press, 1969), p. 67.

story from the beginning. We can see a relationship between enigma stories and disjunctively ambiguous narratives. Disjunctively ambiguous works inevitably create a central puzzle which remains unsolved, not because the text provides no answer, but because it provides two equally tenable answers. According to Rimmon, "Searching for a solution, the reader gropes for clues and realizes that they balance each other in the deadlock of opposition" (p. 45). Further, some of Hawkes's works show that the deadlock of opposition may also result from a lack of any supporting clues.

The best example of a story which combines prospective and introspective devices and retains its ambiguity is James's The Turn of the Screw.¹³ Although prospective ambiguity accounts for the bulk of the story, (as we know from the outset that this is a kind of "ghost story"), we may regard statements about the governess's character and reliability as retrospective clues. Our suspicion of her reliability does not fully peak until the end. The patterning and manipulation of clues within the story force the reader to see conflicting accounts. And though the end "promises" some kind of resolution, that resolution never comes.

Devices of the "Fantastic Story"

The Turn of the Screw is actually a kind of story Tzvetan Todorov has identified as the fantastic--a story which uses elements

¹³Rimmon, p. 125.

of narrative ambiguity in a particularized manner.¹⁴ This type of narrative presents us with events which seem unexplainable by natural laws. We know, for example, that ghosts do not exist in real life, and yet we are asked to "believe" in them in order to see one interpretation of The Turn of the Screw. According to Todorov, the character within the fantastic story must consider that:

. . . either he is the victim of an illusion of the sense, of a product of the imagination--and the laws of the world then remain what they are; or else the event has indeed taken place, it is an integral part of reality--but then this reality is controlled by laws unknown to us. Either the devil is an illusion, an imaginary being; or else he really exists, precisely like other living beings--with this reservation, that we encounter him infrequently (p. 25).

Thus the fantastic presents us with a "hesitation" experienced by a character who must choose to explain an apparently supernatural event by natural laws. The reader or the character can encounter and feel this great hesitation, since, according to Todorov, the fantastic implies "an integration of the reader into the world of the characters; that world . . . defined by the reader's own ambiguous perception of the events narrated" (p. 26). The text obliges the reader to regard the world of the work as a world of living persons who hesitate between the natural and supernatural explanation and the reader does the same. As a result, the reader's role in the narrative becomes

¹⁴Tzvetan Todorov, The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre, trans. Richard Howard (Cleveland: The Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1973).

"entrusted" to the character, and the actual reader comes to identify with that character.¹⁵ Further, Todorov points to an element that makes the fantastic unique:

The fantastic, . . . lasts only as long as a certain hesitation: a hesitation common to reader and character, who must decide whether or not what they perceive derives from "reality" as it exists in the common opinion. At the story's end, the reader makes a decision even if the character does not; he opts for one solution or the other, and thereby emerges from the fantastic (p. 41).

But in those cases where the text disallows the reader from making a legitimate decision, then the story remains truly ambiguous. Certain texts sustain their ambiguity to the very end and even beyond the narrative itself. This accounts for the ambiguity in The Turn of the Screw. It does not permit us to leave the realm of hesitation, for we cannot determine finally whether ghosts haunt the estate, or if the governess is merely a victim of hallucinations prodded by the disturbing atmosphere which engulfs her.

In most fantastic stories, however, we as readers eventually make a choice between the supernatural and natural worlds. If we choose the supernatural explanation, the fantastic element transcends into what Todorov calls the merveilleux which admits of new natural laws by which we can understand the unexplained events. We may, for instance, recognize the existence of supernatural beings, like devils, fairies, and ghosts. We simply accept them as part of the reality

¹⁵Todorov, p. 33.

of the work. If, on the other hand, we choose laws of the natural world, the story enters the realm of l'etrange in which we explain the strange phenomena realistically through dreams, madness, drugs, and hallucinations. Therefore, the fantastic narrative is a transient form which exists only as long as that hesitation experienced by the reader. If the hesitation remains, then the ambiguity remains and repudiates any one explanation. Poe's story "William Wilson" is another example of the permanently fantastic narrative.¹⁶

Gaps in the Narrative

After considering the specialized structures of the inverted story and the fantastic, we can proceed to examine devices which create ambiguity within any narrative. One vitally important device is the gap. In narrative, as in all forms of literature, the creation of gaps (or as Norrman calls them blanks) in the informational structure comprises a universally recognized technique among authors. These all-pervasive elements of literature exist because no narrative can depict every detail of the corresponding real world. Every author must face the task of selecting which events, actions, motives, and thoughts he will dramatize or supply. Those elements which remain untold create a void that the reader must imaginatively fill in until that time when the story supplies the information or the reader realizes that the gaps are permanent. The particular way in which an

¹⁶Shlomith Rimmon, personal letter.

author selects and organizes what he will tell and what he will omit varies from individual to individual and even from age to age. Nevertheless, some types of author-selectivity will exist because of the impossibility of supplying all the pertinent details that go into the creation of the story. Necessarily, then, gaps arise in narratives, and all readers must face the challenge of filling in these gaps and of "inferring the unsaid from the said."¹⁷ Gaps do not necessarily lead to sustained ambiguity. In a narrative, an informational omission may create a sense of ambiguity that is later dismissed or resolved by subsequent textual information. The reader perceives the gap as an ambiguity only temporarily. In some cases, however, the text revives the same ambiguity later through another gap.¹⁸ Indeed, the reader may not even perceive a gap at all in which case any resulting ambiguity does not really exist (since ambiguity is an effect that is dependent on reader recognition). Some gaps persist throughout a narrative and as such are extremely important as devices which create ambiguity.

Monroe Beardsley first called attention to this phenomenon of literary gaps.¹⁹ He offers an example from F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby. When we read that Daisy appears at the hotel,

¹⁷Rimmon, p. 46.

¹⁸Norrman, p. 77. Note that he refers specifically to antitheses (one type of blank or gap).

¹⁹Monroe C. Beardsley, Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1958), p. 242.

we automatically assume that she was born even though the text omits that information. As this rudimentary example reveals, gaps engage us in the process of imaginatively filling in missing information. In a sense, the narrative "forces" us into this process, since the text itself does not supply this bit of information. Again, we see the importance of interaction between text and reader. Beardsley calls this "process of filling out our knowledge of what is going on, beyond what is overtly presented the elucidation of the work" (p. 242). According to Beardsley this process of elucidation occurs both unconsciously and consciously depending upon the nature of the gap.

Literary gaps in narrative works can create different effects depending upon the individual reader. Each reader will complete a gap in a way best suited to his needs, although as we have previously mentioned, that experience (buffered by the governing and controlling aspects of the text itself) will rarely become so individualized that other readers could not relate to it.

Because each narrative contains several different potential realizations, modern writers frequently exploit this dimension. The narratives, as Iser points out,

. . . are often so fragmentary that one's attention is almost exclusively occupied with the search for connections between the fragments; the object of this is not to complicate the 'spectrum' of connections,

so much as to make us aware of the nature of our own capacity for providing links.²⁰

As each individual reads and decides how he will complete the gap, the dynamic nature of the reading process comes into play. Iser further contends that, "By making his decision he [the reader] implicitly acknowledges the inexhaustibility of the text; at the same time it is this very inexhaustibility that forces him to make his decision" (p. 280).

Gaps and their completion also exist without dependence upon reader intervention. In other words, a gap may arise in one sentence and be filled in by textual information in the next. The reader has not creatively intervened except in recognizing the presence of an informational omission. Such gaps create only incidental or transient ambiguity. Others, however, create the sustained or permanent kind. Gaps, then, function at the very heart of ambiguity. Without informational gaps, ambiguity would not arise, since the narrative would present a complete "picture of reality," one viewed at every possible angle, as it were. Of course, this rarely, if ever, occurs in literature, since even the most slavishly diligent of writers could not provide every detail of every event and action depicted.

In order to understand how gaps function to create ambiguity (both temporary and permanent) within literature we must examine

²⁰Wolfgang Iser, The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), p. 280.

different kinds of gaps and the different ways of completing them.²¹ We can classify narrative gaps as to their 1) centrality, 2) duration, 3) level in the narrative structure, and 4) manner of completion. Each of these aspects interrelates with the others.

Centrality of Gaps

Centrality of gaps refers to their relative importance within the overall framework of the narrative structure. Some trivial gaps may not require completion. Frequently, a narrative will include informational gaps not directly relevant to its overall purpose, and we will automatically complete such gaps without consciously thinking. For instance, we automatically make the connection that a character was born when the text provides the information that he walked into a room. These gaps, a perennial part of any narrative, are frequently so trivial that we hardly comprehend them as informational gaps at all. In contrast, other gaps in a narrative become the central aspect of the work and concern us greatly. In murder mysteries, for example, we generally confront the central and crucial informational gap of "Who did it?". Our concerns focus immediately on the gap and its appropriate completion. Without the gap, the "mystery" of the narrative disappears. And once we fill in this particular gap, the narrative must necessarily end. Many novels of Henry James and John Hawkes present stories of this kind in which our

²¹For this discussion I have adopted Rimmon's schema, pp. 46-50.

search for missing information captivates us and becomes our overriding concern. These gaps are central, then, and reside on the opposite end of the spectrum from trivial gaps.

In between the trivial and central gaps, we find gaps with varying degrees of importance. Many gaps may carry import in regards to understanding of one particular unit of the narrative, but the final outcome of the total narrative in no way depends upon the completion of this gap. For instance, John Hawkes's The Blood Oranges presents us with an informational gap concerning the hanging death of one of its characters. Whether or not we can search out clues that will provide us with the answer as to the nature of the hanging is not crucial to our understanding of the overall story.²² Thus this type of gap remains an important concern but not a central one. Apparently, then, we can locate gaps along a continuum with trivial gaps at one end, central gaps at the other, and varying degrees in between.

Duration of Gaps

The aspect of gap duration relates directly to centrality. We usually fill in unimportant or trivial gaps quickly by exposure to

²²In fact, Hawkes admits that he intended no ambiguity as regards this scene. He meant for readers to interpret Hugh's death as accidental. The ambiguity still persists in spite of Hawkes's intention; in fact, this "accidental ambiguity" Hawkes created augments other ambiguities of the book. See below, Chapter VI, for further discussion of Hawkes's views on this scene.

subsequent clues and information or by knowledge of natural laws.

Rimmon cites the following example:

. . . Nick Carraway, the narrator of The Great Gatsby, visits his friend, Tom Buchanan, where, on an enormous couch, he sees "two young women . . . buoyed up as though upon an anchored balloon." One of them he recognizes as his second cousin, Daisy, but "the younger of the two was a stranger to me" (Penguin Modern Classics Edition, p. 14). The question thus arises, "who is the younger woman?" but we have to wait no longer than half a page to hear from Daisy's murmuring lips "that the surname of the balancing girl was Baker," and later we are given much more information about the same young woman (pp. 47-48).

Similarly, as a certain gap takes on more importance, the author may consciously prolong the ambiguous effect by withholding necessary information for a longer period of time. For example, F. Scott Fitzgerald's "Winter Dreams" introduces us to Dexter as a young boy who caddies at the local country club. At fourteen Dexter has decided he does not "want to caddy any more," because he is "too old." His reason for quitting seems plausible enough, except that we know Dexter makes his pocket money by caddying. So we ask, "Why does he quit?" Within seconds Fitzgerald teases us with an informationally incomplete answer--

The little girl who had done this [caused him to quit] was eleven--beautifully ugly as little girls are apt to be who are destined after a few years to be inexpressibly lovely and bring no end of misery to a great number of men.²³

²³F. Scott Fitzgerald, "Winter Dreams," The Art of Fiction, A Handbook and Anthology, eds. R. F. Dietrich and Roger H. Sundell, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1967), p. 283.

Obviously, the tone of the paragraph indicates that this "beautifully ugly little girl" will play an important part in the story's development and in completing the gap concerning Dexter's reason for quitting. But at this point another gap arises relating to the girl's identity. Not until several pages later do we receive a clue that helps to clear up both gaps. As Dexter recalls the embarrassing incident in which the girl's superior attitude bruised his ego and "forced" him into quitting, the text introduces us to the girl and her maid:

Here she [the maid] was stopped by an ominous glance from Miss Jones. . . , (p. 284).

Nevertheless, even this information leaves us with a sense of incompleteness as to the identity of the girl, Miss Jones,

The story then skips many years to Dexter's post college days when we again confront a girl described as "arrestingly beautiful." Although we know it is the same girl, only after an intervening lengthy description do we finally discover her identity when another character says of her: "That Judy Jones! . . . All she needs is to be turned up and spanked for six months and then to be married off to an old-fashioned cavalry captain" (p. 286). Here, Fitzgerald has intentionally manipulated the elements of the story so that the gap remains open longer so as to emphasize her importance in the developing action.²⁴

²⁴This does not, of course, imply that the story itself is ambiguous, which it is not.

Gaps which constitute central enigmas usually remain open until the end of the story. Detective stories provide abundant examples here. Finally, some gaps remain unfilled even after the story ends. John Hawkes's later works reveal unfilled gaps and unresolved questions as does J. P. Donleavy's short story "One for Yes" in which we never know whether George cannot speak or simply refuses to do so. In this way we can distinguish between temporary gaps which the narrative will eventually fill in and permanent gaps which will remain open even beyond the end of the narrative.²⁵

Level at Which the Gap Functions

When we consider any literary gap, we must also consider the level at which the gap is situated and functions. Here, level refers to the structural level of the narrative. For our purposes, we may divide the narrative into the levels of discourse (which includes point of view) and story or content (which includes plot, character, and setting).²⁶ Discourse refers to the actual telling of the tale including and subsuming every other aspect of the story. Discourse includes the sum total of all the depicted actions and events and the ways in which these are artistically arranged. As an example, consider the reversal scene in an inverted story which functions

²⁵Rimmon, p. 48.

²⁶For two different views of levels of the narrative, see Rimmon's discussion of texture, p. 29 and Norrman's discussion of micro and macro, p. 8.

at the level of discourse and thus orders all other elements of the story. Plot refers to the selection and ordering of events and what the narrator chooses to relate to the listener of the world of the story. Character is inextricably woven with plot and includes the textual elements of character reliability and motivation. Point of view functions as another textual device and includes consideration of distance and reliability.

Gaps function variously at these different levels. Generally, less important gaps function at the textual levels, whereas we may locate permanent and central gaps at the textual levels as well as the larger level of discourse. For example, in the preceding reference to "Winter Dreams" we saw a gap situated at the level of character in terms of identity. But this gap also unfolds at the larger level of discourse in terms of the theme of the story. Certainly, overlap exists between the levels of discourse and the other levels, but pinpointing where a gap arises helps us to understand how it functions.

Manner in Which the Gap is Filled

Some literary gaps we may fill in almost automatically because of our prior knowledge regarding life and social and cultural norms. For instance, if a character appears, we know he must have been born and we know he will probably die even though the text may not provide that information. In this way we as readers can fill in the missing information because of our knowledge of the laws of nature and

probability. In many recent works of the Absurdist school of literature, however, a work violates the natural laws of probability and may render us helpless in trying to fill in the gap. At that point only the author can supply the missing information. Other gaps in the narrative require varying degrees of intellectual effort on the part of the reader in order to be completed. An author may, for example, deliberately manipulate rhetorical and structural devices so as to aid or hinder the reader from perceiving the gap and its completing information. Obviously, Fitzgerald had to do more complicated juggling of information in order to prolong the gap in "Winter Dreams" than he did in The Great Gatsby in terms of our identifying the girl in each story. Similarly, it requires more intellectual effort on our parts to put together the fleeting clues which point to Judy Jones's identity than in simply being told by Daisy Miller that Baxter is the girl sitting next to her.

Some gaps remain open in such a way that no matter how skilled and imaginative the reader, the story itself omits essential information necessary for a resolution. Thus no matter how much we study the text of Gone with the Wind, we can never be sure that Rhett Butler returns to Scarlett O'Hara. Nor can we know whether the car crashes and kills Papa and his passengers in Travesty.

Gaps and Probability

In the interim between the opening of a gap and its completion at a later time, just how we go about filling in this gap depends

in part on laws of probability based on our knowledge of life in general and the accepted social, cultural, and moral codes. Further, the filling in of gaps depends on explicit and implicit indications within the text itself. Thus we have both external and internal indications as to how to go about correctly completing a gap. External indicators refer to those laws of nature outside of the text which determine that automatic kind of filling in of information (e.g., A character lives, therefore he must have been born.) However, when probabilities governing the text are not universal like birth, death, taxes, and marriage, accurate exegesis may become quite complex as would be the case with many of Ionesco's plays. Further, some works such as those by Hawkes may require a knowledge of certain literary devices in order to understand completely the world of the work.²⁷ And if the cultural framework of the story is either geographically or chronologically remote from our own, we may experience the same difficulty in filling in gaps of information.²⁸

Internal indicators, those laws peculiar to and functional only within the text, may allow us to fill in the gap with relative ease. On the other hand, though, we may find that a laborious search

²⁷See Donald J. Greiner's discussion of colors in Comic Terror: The Novels of John Hawkes (Memphis: Memphis State University Press, 1973), pp. 189-99. See also Greiner's "The Thematic Use of Color in John Hawkes's Second Skin," Contemporary Literature 11 (Summer 1970): 389-400.

²⁸Rimmon, pp. 49-50.

for clues and connections between those clues awaits us. Internal indicators derived from the internal logic of the work often arise from explicit narration by character. Sometimes, certain of these indicators may contradict others as in the case of two different reports from two apparently reliable characters. For example, John Updike's The Centaur uses two different points of view. The story uses a bouncing third-person point of view which filters mainly through the father's consciousness and the first-person point of view of the son. At times, we as readers receive contradictory information about the same subjects from the two opposing viewpoints.²⁹ As a result, we begin to question the reliability of the two narrators. Only later are the gaps filled in, as one point of view is corroborated by other characters' comments.

Any gaps in a narrative cause us to construct a hypothesis which will supply the missing information until that time when we receive the "correct" information from the text itself. We all have had firsthand experience with this process when we guess the murderer in a detective story. As we receive new information, the gap lessens and we alter our initial interpretation until we finally "discover" at the novel's end the identity of the true culprit. The text may well thwart our attempts to find the information by revealing no clues or positing contradictory clues in which case the ambiguity and the gaps remain open.

²⁹John Updike, The Centaur (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963), pp. 53 and 196. Compare father and son's reaction to Peter's psoriasis.

When we interpret a narrative (and certainly the dynamic process of completing informational gaps constitutes a specialized form of interpretation), we must rely on what Olson calls "probability proofs"³⁰ for reasonable interpretation. Until the text provides us with the correct and missing information, we may at best assume our guess is beyond reasonable doubt. Each plot consists of basic propositions, those "givens" of the text which constitute the actual visible data provided within its structure. For example, in Shakespeare's play, we know that Hamlet is a man and Prince of Denmark. We know, too, that Horatio informed Hamlet of the Ghost because the author shows this as an observable action. Any time we assume a basic proposition, the givens of the text must directly support it. Once we have examined the text's basic propositions we may then and only then begin to make inferences about other aspects of the world of the work: actions, character motivations, etc. Always, Olson says, basic propositions must form the foundation for any inferences, since the basic propositions alone can imply them (p. 226). Olson guides us in making correct inferences based on the internal and external laws of probability that give rise to the basic propositions. Ideally, correct inference depends on 1) recognition of when an inference is required, 2) recognition of the type of inference required (by probability or by signs from basic

³⁰Elder Olson, "Hamlet and the Hermeneutics of Drama," Modern Philology 61 (February 1964): 226. All subsequent unidentified page numbers refers to this article.

propositions), and 3) recognition of what inference to draw (p. 235). Any inference we draw, whether it concerns action, character, or emotion, should not exceed the supporting data of the text (p. 235) and/or the laws of probability that govern the story. Understanding basic propositions, inferences, and laws of probability necessarily precedes a reader's ability to fill in correctly gaps within the narrative. Without this fundamental knowledge, we are apt to draw incorrect conclusions. Further, knowledge about laws of probability releases us from being reliant solely on information the text provides. Instead, our imaginative powers supplement textual information. Without this dimension, we would lose one aspect of the dynamic power of the creative process that is an inherent part of any, but especially, ambiguous literature. Nevertheless, the basic propositions of the text must always form the foundation of our imaginative input.

Recognition of Gaps

Readers may perceive gaps either in advance or in retrospect depending upon their sophistication and the structure of the story. For instance, we may realize an important gap exists early in the narrative. If it is a central ambiguity as in the case of the detective story, then the rest of the reading process will prompt us to fill in the missing information. Some writers, however, construct narratives in such a way that hinders our perceiving the informational gap until after the story ends. The resulting "twist" forces us to

alter our initial interpretation. Both types of gaps may create narrative ambiguity.³¹ Henry James's "The Lesson of the Master" exemplifies the retrospective gap leading to disjunctive ambiguity, since only as we conclude the story does the question arise as to whether or not St. George planned all along to marry Miss Fancourt.

Types of Gaps

Foreshortening

A special kind of gap which may lead to ambiguity is the device of "foreshortening," a term coined by Henry James to denote a situation in which "narrative economy" operates.³² Anytime the author "telescopes" or compresses into a short passage a long, drawn out sequence of events, he may use the device of foreshortening which manipulates the narrative structure in such a way that the reader perceives the events in a secondhand fashion. For instance, an author may omit a crucial scene (a gap), yet leave the reader with a sense of what happened by showing the impact of the events on the characters both before and after the events occurred.³³ In this way the reader recognizes a gap, but still has a sense of its completion. Henry James frequently exploited this technique in order to create sustained ambiguity. John Hawkes also uses this device. A similar

³¹Rimmon, p. 50.

³²Norrman, p. 60.

³³Norrman, p. 61.

device may even function on a visual level if we consider the movie The Great Escape. In this film we never see Steve McQueen's attempted escapes, only his reactions after being captured. Thus a gap exists as to the actual escape itself.

We can see that by using the device of foreshortening, the author creates a sense that the scene either took place, did not take place, or the point is ambiguous.³⁴ In this way the omitted scene becomes a blank or gap for the reader, one that is possibly permanent depending upon the basic propositions of the text. Further, the author may enlarge the gap by allowing different characters within the story to react differently to an unnarrated scene. Gaps of this type function to conceal something according to Norrman (p. 62). Foreshortening is important because it involves us within the dynamic process of uncovering clues and filling in blanks so we may better understand the story. As a result, the context of the missing event takes on new importance and we concentrate on what is in the text instead of what is not. Further, we must read between the lines with far greater skill and acuity.³⁵

Verbally created gaps

Gaps within a narrative may also arise from linguistic devices. As we have said, often verbal ambiguity reinforces and supplements narrative ambiguity. Though not a part of the narrative devices

³⁴Norrman, p. 62.

³⁵Norrman, p. 63.

per se, verbally created gaps nevertheless affect the narrative as such and bear consideration.

One device is the dash (or ellipsis), used either when one character does not complete a sentence or to indicate an interruption of some kind. Here, the "gap" comprises only a few words, but signals some kind of ellipsis and thus ambiguity. Literature of all kinds is replete with examples of the dash used to indicate some kind of sexual inuendo. An author may intentionally compel us to fill in the created blank with a dirty thought through the context he has created. And in this way the author successfully shifts the blame for the inuendo from himself to the reader and makes the reader share in creating the fictional work.³⁶ Norrman points out a beautiful illustration of the power of this device in Laurence Sterne's Sentimental Journey:

We wonder about the motives of the characters. Did Yorick, for instance, give the snuff-box to the Franciscan monk in an outburst of genuine remorse or merely to impress his lady friend. . . . In the last chapter, when Yorick and the lady have gone to bed in the same room, having made a treaty not to cross a line of demarcation between them, Sterne ends the book with the following blank:

So that when I stretch'd out my hand, I caught hold of the Fille de Chambre's--

END OF VOL. II (pp. 63-64, Norrman).

Of course we will, in all probability, fill in the gap with some appropriate anatomical part as suggested by the context. The dash,

³⁶Norrman, p. 64.

here, certainly creates a gap in the informational structure which in turn may cause ambiguity and equivocation.

Shirley Jackson's short story "Janice" gives another example. In this story extensive use of the dash to indicate extraction reduces the narrator's credibility. Because she uses the dash so often, we realize that she is adapting the story and leaving out sections. As a result, an ambiguity arises as to her motivation; we cannot be sure why she tells this story.³⁷

Sometimes authors combine words which seem to cancel each other out and thus create ambiguity. Again, many stories of Henry James use this device. For example, in What Maisie Knew, the words "ugly honesty" create a blank by providing "self-erasing" word combinations.³⁸ Norrman points out that "This coupling of a positive adjective with a negative noun works like double negatives neutralizing each other or cancelling each other out and creating a blank" (p. 73). Such word combinations create a gap and force us to pause during which time we must reevaluate past information so that we can adequately fill in the gap with our own meaning.³⁹

Similar to the self-erasing word combination is the antithesis in which the author juxtaposes opposites in order to imply

³⁷For a discussion of this topic see Beverly Whitaker Long et al., Group Performance of Literature (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1977), p. 41.

³⁸Norrman, pp. 191-92.

³⁹Norrman, p. 74.

equivocation of some kind. The antithesis implies that the true meaning may lie somewhere in between the two extremes. The answer, however, never appears and the reader must decide for himself.⁴⁰ Antithesis may in this way create ambiguity or obscurity as may all these other types of gaps.

Incomplete Reversals

Literary artists often reinforce a theme they deal with in their work of art by letting it spill over into the relationship between the work and the reader. When the theme is fragmentation and discontinuity Sterne in the organization of his work treats the reader to some of the experience that the characters have to suffer. In The Confidence-Man Melville cons the reader in the same way as his characters con each other, perplexing him about whom to trust in order to give depth to his treatment of the theme. The reader becomes a victim of the book itself in a way that parallels the characters' experience in their confrontation with the inscrutable world on board the Fidèle. Melville's technique here is one of periodic reambiguation. Contradictions which seem to be on the point of being disambiguated, are suddenly revived as Melville reinforces the alternative which has been growing weaker and the reader realizes that he has been had again.⁴¹

What we have here is Herman Melville's characteristic and frequently employed ambiguity-creating device that critic John Cawelti has labeled the incomplete reversal.⁴² We can borrow this term and apply it to a group of ambiguity-creating fictional methods that repeatedly appear in the narratives of some authors. Cawelti

⁴⁰Norrman, p. 77.

⁴¹Norrman, p. 13.

⁴²John Cawelti. "Some Notes on the Structure of The Confidence-Man," American Literature 29 (November 1957): 278-88.

defines the incomplete reversal as a technique wherein;

Something is presented, a character, an incident, an idea, anything which might give the reader some clue to the interpretation of the represented reality; then a counter incident or idea appears, powerful enough to destroy the usefulness of the first clue, but insufficient to provide a foundation for a new interpretation of what has been presented. We are left in the air with no way of resolving two mutually exclusive possibilities (pp. 282-83).

Obviously, what Cawelti and Norrman both describe here is a device which functions to create disjunctive ambiguity. Rimmon discusses a similar but not identical device, one she calls "singly directed clues," wherein the narrative presents one clue which balances a previous clue and never allows the reader to choose between them (p. 52). Thus with this device every scene, event, and conversation which supports one particular interpretation eventually balances other scenes, events, or conversations which support an opposite and mutually exclusive interpretation.⁴³ As a result:

. . . such singly directed evidence [the incomplete reversal] momentarily seems to offer the comfort of definitively turning the scale in favor of one of the mutually exclusive possibilities. But they soon recede to the background, and the comfort . . . is frustrated when other pieces of evidence . . . come to the fore.⁴⁴

This device that we shall designate as an incomplete reversal frequently appears in the writings of Pinter, James, Hawkes, and

⁴³Rimmon, pp. 52-53.

⁴⁴Rimmon, p. 53.

Melville. The author intentionally manipulates the narrative in such a way that will upset the balance between alternative readings so that the reader teeter-totters between one or the other. One alternative partially replaces another through specific incipient clues that foster the new interpretation; but those new clues do not completely remove the residue of the first reading.⁴⁵ Flannery O'Connor's short story "The Displaced Person" provides us with examples of the incomplete reversal in operation.⁴⁶ The ambiguous act in question revolves around the "accidental" death of a hired immigrant worker, Mr. Guizac. The owner of the farm on which he works, Mrs. McIntyre, along with the other farm workers---Sulk, a Negro, and Mr. and Mrs. Shortley, the dairyman and his wife--obviously resent this "displaced person's" presence. His foreign ways and inability to communicate foster suspicion in the others which builds throughout the story. The parallel between Guizac and Christ arises here and is further reinforced by the title of the story. In the death scene a tractor under which Mr. Guizac is working rolls over his back and breaks his spine:

Mr. Shortley had got on the large tractor and was backing it out from under the shed. He seemed to be warmed by it as if its heat and strength sent impulses up through him that he obeyed instantly. He had headed it toward the small tractor but he braked it on a slight incline and jumped off and turned back toward the shed. Mrs. McIntyre was

⁴⁵Norrman, p. 190.

⁴⁶Some people will undoubtedly argue that irony rather than ambiguity functions in this story. Certainly, irony exists, but we can argue that ambiguity of the disjunctive type also operates within the story in part due to the possibility of an ironic narrative voice,

looking fixedly at Mr. Guizac's legs lying flat on the ground now. She heard the brake on the large tractor slip and, looking up, she saw it move forward, calculating its own path. Later she remembered that she had seen the Negro jump silently out of the way as if a spring in the earth had released him and that she had seen Mr. Shortley turn his head with incredible slowness and stare silently over his shoulder and that she had started to shout to the Displaced Person but that she had not. She had felt her eyes and Mr. Shortley's eyes and the Negro's eyes come together in one look that froze them in collusion forever, and she had heard the little noise the Pole made as the tractor wheel broke his backbone.⁴⁷ The two men ran forward to help and she fainted.

We can argue that this paragraph presents us with a central and permanent informational gap, since we never learn the exact nature of Guizac's death. We see as the first alternative that Mr. Guizac's death was totally an act of fate, an accident that the other characters conveniently decided to "let happen." But the basic propositions of the text earlier indicate an equally tenable alternative: Mr. Guizac's death was not accidental. In fact, Mr. Shortley, Mrs. McIntyre, and Sulk planned it. Throughout the story one incident after the other alternatively supports one or the other of these two mutually exclusive possibilities.

The Dismissed Alternative

Many separate devices function as a type of the incomplete reversal. The dismissed alternative is one in which:

⁴⁷Flannery O'Connor, A Good Man is Hard to Find and other Stories (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1955), pp. 249-50.

. . . a hint is brought into the narrative in negated form. This device closely resembles irony in its function. The reader has to puzzle out whether or not the sense of the statement should be reversed and the negation ignored.⁴⁸

Thus a character introduces an idea only to dismiss it immediately in his own mind though a residue of the hint remains in the reader's. James fills The Turn of the Screw with the type of ambiguity-creating device. For instance, the governess writes, "It was not, I am as sure to-day as I was then, my mere infernal imagination." Here, the internal negation of the sentence presents the reader with two mutually exclusive alternatives. Either it was the governess's imagination or it was not. Norrman points out that James has made his character structure the sentence so that "the very denial recognizes the existence of what is denied. Even though the existence is recognized only to be dismissed, once called up it becomes at the least a weak possibility and therefore a matter of ambiguity."⁴⁹

The "negation" of the dismissed alternative may come about in the form of perjorative words, not merely a negation in its strictest sense. Words such as "selfish," "petty," and "greedy" may be used to describe a character intending that the reader interpret them in the opposite sense. Of course, whose intentions they are, the speaker or the character, will make a difference in how we interpret them.

⁴⁸Norrman, p. 191.

⁴⁹Norrman, p. 14.

Authors will use the dismissed alternative to cause the reader to reject the first alternative over the second or to create ambiguity, thus disallowing them to choose.⁵⁰ Resultingly, the reader feels more and more like the characters of the narrative itself where each sign of proof seems like a sign of the opposite of what it overtly seems to stand for.⁵¹ The built-in weakness of this type of ambiguity-creating device is that the naive reader may miss the "twist" and read only the negated sense of the alternative.⁵²

The Dash

Another type of incomplete reversal is use of shared dialogue where a dash stands for interruption of one character's dialogue and marks the border between two halves of an utterance "shared" by two different people. Thus one character begins a sentence but another character finishes it. We as readers are left to guess as to the correctness of the substituted ending,⁵³ since we cannot simply assume that the interruption constitutes a correct guess.

Devices of Character

Olson points out that character frequently clarifies the motivation for and nature of an act.⁵⁴ In this way we may correctly

⁵⁰Norrman, p. 18.

⁵¹Norrman, p. 19.

⁵²Norrman, p. 17.

⁵³Norrman, pp. 29-30

⁵⁴Olson, p. 223.

assume that a power-greedy duke murdered his king, although the nature of the act itself appears equivocal. One way of seeing the interdependency of action and character is through examining discourse since discourse between characters refers to the actual manifestation in language of events that have occurred and are occurring.⁵⁵ We infer character from his actions, his speech, and his emotions. Further, character must not rest upon what is done in a single instance, but what is done consistently. Any contradiction might indicate ambiguity. A given individual may react one way to his friends and another to his enemies. But both sets of actions may be consistent with his overall character.⁵⁶

Character Motivation

The devices used to reveal or mask a character's motives often exist as clues to show some aspect of the reading is meant to be equivocal. These clues provide ways of creating an incomplete reversal so that the reader realizes ambiguity is operating. Such clues may grow out of our understanding of a character and his potential motives. In Hamlet, for instance, we may first interpret Claudius's speech as an act--for he is not merely saying something, but doing something by saying it. Also the act must be considered in all its known circumstances. The circumstances of motive may

⁵⁵Rimmon, p. 35.

⁵⁶Olson, p. 234.

force a complete revision of our conception of the act itself.⁵⁷

In another instance the text may leave unexplained a character's motives, thereby calling for conflicting interpretations on the part of the reader.⁵⁸ We may thus classify two kinds of ambiguity associated with character motive. First we may have incomplete knowledge of a character's motives. The author or narrator simply withholds information. We cannot understand the motive behind an action because the motive is left unexplained. Thus we as readers must interpret the action based on the clues we do have. A second kind of ambiguity may arise when contradictions arise between a character's surface meaning and his "real" meaning. In other words we see some discrepancy in what the character says and what he means. Here again, we cannot be sure if he says what he means. As a result, ambiguity arises. For example, a character's action may give rise to an incomplete reversal by giving a "twist" to a statement, act, or look that the reader would otherwise take at face value. For instance, we judge one lady bumping into another as an accident, until the author describes a certain kind of sinister look in the first lady's eyes and we realize the accident was no accident at all. This, of course, resembles the negation of a dismissed alternative. Here, though, the "negation" can come not only from words, but from

⁵⁷Olson, p. 227.

⁵⁸Rimmon, p. 144.

the description we receive of a look or glance. This device functions in "The Displaced Person" where the narration describes one character, Mr. Shortley, at the moment the tractor is about to roll over and break the spine of Mr. Guizac: ". . . Mr. Shortley turn[ed] his head with incredible slowness and stare[d] silently over his shoulder" ⁵⁹ Here, then, is an incomplete clue as to Mr. Shortley's motives. Because he turns away, we could accuse him of "letting" Mr. Guizac's death happen. This type of clue can function in a way to "incompletely reverse" what the story had led us to believe before. We may perceive this type of clue only after we recognize that ambiguity is operating. On a superficial reading the clue might go unnoticed. ⁶⁰ Thus ambiguity affects clues suggesting it and vice versa.

Cognitive Clues and Misunderstandings

Whereas the psychological clues we have just discussed concern motives underlying a character's behavior or discourse, cognitive clues concern his thought processes. In other words, clues are cognitive if they refer to how a character arrives at what he knows or thinks he knows. ⁶¹ For instance, two apparently reliable characters may interpret one particular sign in two different ways. Thus

⁵⁹O'Connor, p. 249.

⁶⁰Rimmon, p. 143.

⁶¹Rimmon, p. 145.

communication between them will be inhibited just as ambiguity will arise in the mind of the reader.⁶² Similarly, how characters respond to and interpret conversations and signs may result in misunderstandings, one type of cognitive clue. Misunderstandings may arise within the language of conversation "not only as serious and significant mutual mistakes in the interpretation of the meaning of one's partner in a dialogue, but also as trivial, brief misunderstandings of sounds, words or phrases which are cleared up by queries and repetitions."⁶³ Misunderstandings function at the levels of character and reader since a misunderstanding between characters may confuse the reader as to the proper interpretation of the misunderstood act. When we interpret a misunderstanding between characters as such and then attribute correctness to one character's interpretation of that misunderstanding, we reveal a great deal about ourselves and which of the latent meanings we choose to activate. In the same way, the character focuses attention upon his or her cognitive processes by interpreting correctly or incorrectly a situation or event or act. Anytime a misunderstanding occurs it may point to some essential information which in turn may function as a partial clue to support one of two alternatives. But until the misunderstanding clears up, we as readers remain in a state of not knowing which side to believe.

⁶²Rimmon, p. 228.

⁶³Norrman, p. 192.

Characters can evade an issue in a discussion or the author can use misunderstandings for characterization or for clandestine communication with the reader.

Contradictions

When two or more characters contradict one another, we see operating one of the simplest ambiguity-creating devices. For instance two characters may tell two different versions of the same story to a third character. Unless we know that one of the two is unreliable, we (like the third character) will be faced with a contradiction. In "The Figure in the Carpet" for example, one character, Corvick, tells the narrator that he and another character, his former fiancée are not engaged. Later, the fiancée says that they are engaged. Whom does the narrator believe? Similarly, what does the reader do if one character lies and the reader does not know or cannot decipher which character is lying? This device creates disjunctive ambiguity until the basic propositions of the text prove one of the characters unreliable or some other resolution occurs. The reader must study the motives of each character in order to see what motive each might have for lying. Thus, as Norrman points out, "the ambiguity furthers our interest both in the characters and the plot."⁶⁴

In like manner ambiguity may arise when we as readers hear the testimony of a deceived character. The uninformed source can cause

⁶⁴Norrman, p. 27, footnote 25.

ambiguity due to contradiction or simple lack of clarity within the narrative.

Peculiar Logic

An author may also suggest ambiguity by allowing a certain character to fill out "gaps" within the story to suit his needs and peculiar logic.⁶⁵ No character is immune to self-deception any more than we are in real life. Some characters, however, develop a twisted kind of logic in which they can escape the responsibility of responding to the world within which they live. When a character lives in his own reality and leads a life of perception totally unique to him, it usually leads us to suspect the validity of what he says. In Thomas Tryon's The Other, the presumably reliable narrator turns out to be a totally demented character. In retrospect we must go back over all of his account because we now know he exists in his own reality and his peculiar logic may have distorted everything he told us. In Hawkes's The Blood Oranges, we find that Cyril's reliability as a narrator is suspect in part because of the peculiar logic he has developed to cope with an uncomfortable situation. And in Eudora Welty's "Why I Live at the P.O." Sister's story is tainted by the peculiar logic she has developed as a response to her jealousy and paranoia. Because Sister has such an acute persecution complex and because she is so subjective both in her telling and

⁶⁵Norrman, p. 47.

showing us past events that led to her leaving home, we cannot take her story at face value. Her perspective is so biased that it obviously distorts her story and we as readers must realize these distortions. Several small ambiguities arise in this clever short story as a result of Sister's prejudice. For instance, Sister makes her views blatantly clear about her sister Stella's two year old child. Through sarcasm and innuendo she implies that the child is not adopted as Stella-Rondo claims, and thus suggests her sister "had" to get married. All the other characters in the story bear out Stella-Rondo's claim that the child is indeed adopted. She says she can prove it, but if Stella offers proof, Sister never bothers to let us in on it. Thus we have Sister's word against the words of the other characters, and since Sister so obviously perceives herself and others in a distorted manner, we cannot take Sister's word at face value. We must realize that peculiar logic is operating here as a potential ambiguity-creating device.

Stereotypes

Finally, when an author stereotypes certain characters we may distrust their actions and behavior if the rest of the story is realistically depicted. The author here may have intentionally designed the stereotyping in order to draw attention to the unreliability of the character. Furthermore, this may be a signal as to the probabilities which are operating within the story.

Ambiguity of Setting

John Hawkes's technique of alternating dream and reality creates ambiguities which arise within the setting of the story. In other words, the setting itself becomes ambiguous because we cannot tell whether we are viewing events in the dream or real setting. This technique, unique to the fiction of John Hawkes, offers another ambiguity-creating device.

Devices of Point of View

Many of the devices just discussed apply to point of view if the narrator is a character in the story. For instance, Cyril in The Blood Oranges is both narrator and a character. As a result, his peculiar logic affects not only his telling of the story but his actions within the story as a character. Ambiguity can arise in other ways because of point of view.

Shifting Point of View

Sometimes several narrators exist in the same story. This may cause sequential ambiguity because several narrators exist simultaneously with whom we can identify.⁶⁶ Although Bronte's Wuthering Heights is not in itself an ambiguous novel, it does contain more than one narrator. The housekeeper tells the story to Lockwood who then tells the story to us. John Updike's The

⁶⁶Rimmon, p. 39.

Centaur similarly contains a shifting point of view which leads to contradictions in the story. Ambiguities arise as a result of these contradictions. Anytime we confront such a shift in point of view we must ask ourselves if we can trust the different viewpoints. Suppose they present conflicting information? Then we are faced with the same kind of ambiguity that occurs in a narrative in which two different characters present conflicting information. We must also ask ourselves what their motives are for telling the story and how their role in the action affects their vision of the events they describe.⁶⁷

Bouncing Point of View

Related to but different from actual shifts in point of view is a bouncing viewpoint. Forster first labeled this technique of shifting the point of view as "bouncing"⁶⁸ which is possible only with the third-person omniscient point of view. What happens ostensibly is that all the possibilities of the omniscient and limited point of view blend.⁶⁹ And anytime a bouncing point of view exists, the reader has to make his own decision about the characters and events described. In James's "In the Cage" we see ambiguities arising because of the mixture of points of view, Which alternative the reader accepts depends on the context.⁷⁰ In "The Displaced Person"

⁶⁷Raban, p. 35.

⁶⁸Raban, p. 36.

⁶⁹Raban, p. 36.

⁷⁰Norrman, p. 145.

part of the ambiguity arises as a result of bouncing point of view throughout the story. Most of the first half of the story is filtered to us through the biased eyes of Mrs. Shortley; thus information regarding the personalities and motives of Mr. Guizac or her husband carries a concomitant prejudice. The narrator, though, presents most of the second half of the story through Mrs. McIntyre's eyes. The death scene in particular invokes special interest because descriptive narration shifts from the narrator-proper to the point of view of Mrs. McIntyre. If the narrator had presented her own omniscient, reliable account and not withheld information, the ambiguity would not exist.

Narrator Unreliability

We can see, too, that narrator reliability plays a key role not only in ironic stories but in ambiguous narratives as well. Some of our greatest challenges in interpretation arise when we perceive a story through the eyes of an apparently unreliable narrator.⁷¹ Abrams points out that "Henry James made repeated use of the narrator whose excessive innocence, or oversophistication, or moral obtuseness, makes him a flawed and distorting" narrator.⁷² The result, according to Abrams, is that an elaborate structure of conflicting information "frustrates the reader because he lacks

⁷¹Booth, p. 339.

⁷²M.H. Abrams, A Glossary of Literary Terms, 3d ed., (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), p. 136.

sufficient clues to determine what the author intended as the true facts of the case" (p. 136). In James's "The Aspern Papers" and "The Liar" the apparently unreliable narrators intensify and reinforce the central ambiguities. In James's The Turn of the Screw the central ambiguity rests upon our view of the governess's reliability as a narrator.⁷³ John Hawkes frequently uses first-person narrators whose reliability is suspect. Much of the ambiguity that arises in Second Skin, The Blood Oranges, Travesty, and Death, Sleep, & The Traveler stems from our inability to discern whether or not the first-person narrators are reliable or not. We must remember, though, that if we finally discern the narrator is unreliable, the story becomes ironic and not ambiguous. It is only when we cannot positively decide whether or not the narrator is unreliable that we have true ambiguity.

Oscillation within a Single Point of View

Closely related to the effects of shifting viewpoints is the effect of an oscillation of attitude in a single viewpoint. This vacillation can sometimes cause unresolved conflicts that eventually manifest themselves as some type of ambiguity to the reader. In Lawrence's Sons and Lovers (not an ambiguous work in and of itself) the narrator shows evidences of a vacillating attitude toward both

⁷³Although Booth calls this an example of unintentional ambiguity, Rimmon and others see it as a central device contributing to the long debated question of ambiguity in the James novel; see Rimmon, pp. 116-29 and Booth, pp. 339-74.

Paul and Miriam. As a result, we perceive him as immature, but because he strives to order and reduce his ambivalent feelings, a chaotic, jumbled struggle translates to the reader which may give rise to temporary ambiguity. And this kind of oscillation in the narrator's view reinforces the central enigma in James's "The Figure in the Carpet."⁷⁴ since our concept of whether or not a figure exists in the carpet depends upon the narrator's view.

Ambiguity in First-Person Narration

Authors frequently use first-person point of view when they wish to establish a greater sense of immediacy with their readers. However, by so doing, the author sacrifices the objectivity that the third-person narrator may bring to the story. First-person narration is necessarily limited in view to the insights of the narrator. We as readers supplement this view by our own inferences drawn from basic propositions of the text. Therefore, the limited view of the first-person narrator may mislead us. In the same way that we do, the first-person narrator must draw inferences as to how others are feeling and what they are thinking and, as a result, the narrator, like the reader, is open to the same kinds of mistakes. We must consider the limitations and idiosyncracies of any first-person character-narrator, since we obtain information from him. This consideration is imperative since he may be, to one extent or another, unreliable.⁷⁵

⁷⁴Rimmon, p. 134.

⁷⁵R. F. Dietrich and Roger H. Sundell, eds., The Art of Fiction, A Handbook and Anthology (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1967), p. 113.

Further Dietrich and Sundell point out that:

While a limited point of view does add to the credibility and lifelikeness of the story, its narrow angle of vision often poses for the writer the difficult problem of finding devices that will extend the range of knowledge of the point of view character.⁷⁶

Because the writer must search for such "extending devices," he may create ambiguity. For example, one way in which the author may extend the first-person narrator's range of knowledge is to shift the point of view which we have already discussed as a possible source of sequential ambiguity; or he may allow the narrator or a character within the story to "enter" into the heads of other characters and hypothesize as to what the characters' thoughts are. Henry James and John Hawkes both use this technique. James used this technique in order to avoid omniscient narrator intrusion, although the two devices are much the same. The problem arises in that the reader may forget that these intrusions are only the supposed words of the other character. And since the first-person narrator (or any limited narrator) must necessarily interpret and infer, we must realize that these inferences may be incorrect. We must, therefore, consider author's "quoted" interior monologues as potential ambiguity-creating devices.⁷⁷

⁷⁶Dietrich and Sundell, p. 113.

⁷⁷Norrman, pp. 24-25, 28-29.

Ambiguity in Third-Person Narration

Even when we have a third-person narrator where omniscience is limited to a single character, the effect resembles that of the first-person narrator, because, again, we see events through the experiences, feelings, and responses of a single character. With the omniscient third-person point of view, however, problems of ambiguity may arise because we are led to believe that the narrator reports facts alone. And since he has privileged access to any character's thoughts, feelings, and emotions, we may not realize that the question of his reliability necessarily **arises**.

Distance in Time

All narratives create some type of time scheme. A narrator tells his story in the present but the events he narrates generally occur in the past. Thus how close to the time of the actual event the narrator retells his story may account for distortion and ambiguity. For instance, distance between the time of an event and the narrator's remembrance of it can result in inaccuracy in its report with any but the reliable, omniscient narrator. As a result, we are given one set of clues that corroborate a particular overall interpretation, when we later discover that the narrator's version of the story has been distorted by time. In "The Displaced Person," for example, Mr. McIntyre only later remembered seeing Sulk jump out of the way of the moving tractor as if intentionally allowing Guizac's death. Distortion could account for this information, since a time lag exists between what she remembered and what actually transpired.

Anytime we consider the narrator, we must also consider when he tells his story in relation to the events narrated because this may affect his reliability. As a result, readers should be on guard for words pointing to a marked difference in the time between the event as it occurred and the event as narrated.⁷⁸

Summary

Ambiguity, as we have seen, can manifest itself in a variety of ways in the narrative structure. In prose fiction in particular, authors can create or intensify ambiguity by manipulating gaps in the narration that operate on the levels of centrality (importance), duration (how long they last), level at which situated (discourse or content), and manner filled (through our own prior knowledge or by the text). We have also seen that the exact designs of probability operating within and outside the work are important in determining how a reader may best fill in a gap. Ambiguity may also arise through the device of foreshortening, a special type of narrative gap. Verbally-created gaps may even intensify narrative ambiguity.

A second major classification of ambiguity-creating devices comes under the heading of Incomplete reversals in which we are presented some information which temporarily turns the tide of the reader's interpretation in favor of one alternative and is particularly important in creating disjunctive ambiguity. Examples of

⁷⁸See Long et al., for clues as to performance.

this device include the dismissed alternative, misunderstandings between characters, peculiar logic, and contradictions, Point of view and all that it entails may also create ambiguity in the narrative. First- and third-person narrators whether omniscient or limited can cause special problems that may result in ambiguity. Likewise, unreliability, shifting points of view, oscillation in a single viewpoint, and distance can intensify or create ambiguity. Particular types of ambiguous narratives (such as the inverted or retrospectively ambiguous story, the enigma narrative in which the fundamental ambiguity arises early in the story, and the genre known as the fantastic) may employ any or all of the devices. The next chapter will discuss the performance of narrative ambiguity. The devices discussed in this chapter will be applied in Chapter VI to the early writings of author John Hawkes in order to reveal specific implications for their performance and performance of the narrative in general.

CHAPTER V

THE PERFORMANCE OF NARRATIVE AMBIGUITY

Thus far we have considered what ambiguity is, how it functions in its linguistic and narrative capacities, how various scholars perceive it, and the actual devices an author has available to create it in a narrative text. At this point we need to consider its relationship to performance--that is, how the interpreter can perform narrative ambiguity in ways that preserve and/or feature it. First of all, he must discover if ambiguity operates in the text. He must of course, look for clues (or lack of them) which point to the presence of ambiguities. He can approach this discovery in several different ways. Perhaps, after reading the narrative, he may be struck by the ambiguity. He must then go back over the text and search out the specific clues which directed his insights in one direction. Then he must uncover those clues that must exist in order to indicate an opposite interpretation. These opposing sets of clues (singly directed clues) may appear in any form. For instance, in John Hawkes's early novels, stereotyping of characters provides clues that ambiguity operates. In The Blood Oranges, a later novel, our suspicion as to the narrator, Cyril's, reliability places the validity of the narrative at stake and renders several key incidents ambiguous. Whatever the ambiguity-creating devices, we must be on

guard for them (keeping in mind that new writers may very easily create new devices).

At this point, it might be wise for the performer to make an actual list of gaps or devices which contribute to and create ambiguity. Such a list will help direct his performance approach throughout the entire rehearsal period. More importantly, this list can prevent performance mistakes that may unduly weight one of the alternatives. In other words, this list of clues will provide a visible framework within which the reader can adapt the work for performance. In virtually all performances, he must adapt the literature to meet the time requirements. Only a very few situations require no time constraints. As with performance of all literature, interpreters must not destroy the essence of the selection through a poor or careless adaptation. In the case of ambiguous narratives it is doubly important to guard against deleting clues leading to and underscoring the ambiguity inherent within the text. Even if an interpreter cuts a single clue (and here I am speaking broadly of any ambiguity-creating device), he may inadvertently upset the delicate balance between differing interpretations and unwittingly weight one of the alternatives. For example, in any of Hawkes's early works where time warping dominates the structure, performing scenes out of sequence may clarify their chronological order, but it would destroy the time warping device and thus the ambiguity.

Or in any narrative where clues suggest opposing character motivations, cutting even one clue might force the interpretation in one direction or the other. Ideally, performers should avoid all cutting of the author's text, but since practicality necessitates this, they must carefully deal with ambiguous literature and avoid deleting any clues which point to its presence.

Solo and Group Performance

What we have considered up to this point is a part of the pre-performance process, analysis. Though this phase is no less important than the performance itself, it is through actual performance that interpreters can feature the ambiguity. The remainder of this chapter will suggest specific techniques and aspects of performance which may help to preserve and underline the ambiguity in a narrative. Depending upon whether we perform in a group or alone, we may feature aspects of the ambiguous narrative in various ways.

Solo Performance

Probably the most useful and important method available to the solo performer is his ability to select the exact mental outlook that he will perform. In other words, the solo performer is only one person performing one action at any given time, and because of this limitation, he can and must select who he will be and what he will be doing. He can perform only one point of view at any given time, whereas in group performance, (because a single character can be

represented by more than one performer), several points of view can be performed at once. But we could never expect the solo performer to play all points of view at once. Therefore, if the solo performer confronts a shifting or bouncing point of view that creates sequential ambiguity, he can shift his point of view without emphasizing any single point of view as "correct." If instead of shifting points of view, the ambiguity arises as a result of possible narrator unreliability, again the solo performer must take care to make conscious choices in terms of actions that will show equivocation. He may have decided that the narrator is unreliable in his own mind, but if he finds an action indicative of reliability in the text, he must perform the action in a reliable fashion. In this way, the solo performer will select and perform actions which suggest one state of mind or the other. Obviously, problems might arise for the solo performer when he tries to represent or play ambiguities, especially in terms of characters' motives. If the text indicates ambiguity in terms of a character's motives, then the text might tempt the performer to rely on inexpressiveness. Inexpressiveness, though, will not preserve the ambiguity anymore than will consciously favoring one alternative in performance. Inexpressiveness simply creates a bland performance which may destroy the literature and its effects. In the case of disjunctive ambiguity again the performer can do one of two things. First, he can try to discover an action (either mental or physical) that is workable for him, but at the same time one that

will not resolve the ambiguity for the audience. As a part of this discovery, he will probably do well to find a subtext for the action that will not disambiguate it. If the performer finds that his subtext presupposes a certain mental outlook or state, he must perform true to that outlook and find other ways of retaining the equivocal nature of the line or action. Probably the best technique available to him grows out of one set of ambiguity-creating devices--the incomplete reversal--in which two sets of clues, each leading to a different interpretation are included. Here, the performer can create opposing subtexts for the two sets of clues and play them honestly. He will not have to worry about arriving at an action that remains ambiguous. Instead, he can at one point play Cyril in The Blood Oranges as unreliable and at another point as reliable, as the text dictates. In this way he will prolong the ambiguity in his performance as long as the ambiguity remains. A solo performer is probably not in much danger of accidentally resolving ambiguity in his performance. But unlike the multiple readers in a group performance, he does not have specific techniques available to him through which he can feature the ambiguity. This is not to suggest that a creative solo performer must rely on the inexpressive or bland performance to embody an ambiguous text. Any good performer will discover ways of embodying the ambiguity of a text just as he finds ways of embodying the narrator or characters through his actual performance. But as with all performances, those discoveries will lead to different techniques and methods for each individual.

Anytime the solo interpreter performs a character whose motives are unexplained thus rendering his actions ambiguous, the performer must be careful not to weight one or the other alternatives with specific facial expressions. Again, inexpressiveness is not the answer unless the text calls for an irresolute and expressionless face. The key is not to destroy the ambiguous nature of Hawkes's (or any) texts through consciously weighting one alternative. The solo performer must never go beyond the reasonable possibilities of the text to find ways of preserving ambiguity.

Group Performance

Simply because of the nature of group performances which use multiple readers, certain techniques avail themselves to this media that the solo performer cannot adapt. For example, groups may use all those techniques which indicate the non-literal or symbolic level of literature to underscore certain ambiguity-creating devices. Use of slow motion can indicate a dream or hallucinatory sequence in group performance which could also underscore ambiguous scenes. In The Goose on the Grave, readers might elect to perform in slow motion the action describing the monks as they incinerate Adeppi's mother as the narrator describes it. Certainly readers could perform in a similar manner many of the hallucinatory scenes in Charivari.

Using scenes of simultaneous action where all characters are in the same scene at the same time could feature the time warpings in Hawkes's early novels. Or perhaps the split screen technique in

which performers present different action simultaneously on opposite sides of the stage could illuminate the sense of incompatibility of alternatives. In conjunction with this technique, performers might choose to employ freezes or even pantomime in featuring alternatives or uncertainty. For example, in The Blood Oranges, Hugh's hanging death is equivocal because Cyril insists it was an accident while the description corroborates suicide. During the narration, a group reading might perform the two different possibilities in slow motion pantomime using the split screen effect so that neither alternative takes precedence. Or another possibility would be simply to freeze the action while the narration occurs so that no visible proof exists to support one interpretation or the other.

Repeated actions provide another way of performing ambiguous events or actions. Here, the group may perform a scene, freeze the action momentarily, and then with stylized action reverse and reperform it in the way suggestive of the other alternative. And certainly, visual elements such as lighting, music, costumes, and makeup can all help to feature any sort of ambiguity.

If we consider Hawkes's works we can see how these types of group performance techniques may help feature the ambiguity of his works. Consider his use of time warping. Here again any of the techniques of group performance traditionally used to indicate non-literal elements of the selection may work. Performing the opening dream sequence in Charivari in slow motion might help to set the mood

of the entire novel. In a seashore sequence in which Henry Van mistakes a woman in the black hat for his wife, Emily, we might employ a freeze of the scene at the moment before the woman appears and rely on the narrative description. In this way we would not have to commit ourselves one way or the other to suggesting that the woman is or is not Emily. Rather, the point would remain ambiguous. Further, mood lighting (blue) might be used to suggest the equivocation of the sequence itself--for we do not know if it is real or imagined action. In his works in which a great deal of time-hopping occurs (such as in Second Skin, 1964) using two or more performers as narrators would underscore the distance between the telling of and occurrence of events. Certainly, in those scenes from the past that Hawkes seems to plunk down in the middle of the present, use of a specialized area on the stage may help to indicate the time and place warping. However, the group must be sure to include the same visual clues (lighting, music) for both the past and present scenes so as to retain the ambiguity.

Certainly, readers in a group performance should acquaint themselves as to the uses of masks and certain costumes. In many cases the ancient Greek concept of using whole face masks does away with one very real problem in trying to preserve the ambiguity in character actions--it hides facial expression. Anytime actions seem unclear or equivocal, performers may inadvertently weight one alternative by performing certain facial expressions. Even in the case of the monks

incinerating the mother, the performers might reveal motives by having a demented or grim look on their faces that the text leaves intentionally unexplained. The mask would remedy this disambiguation and instead leave open the equivocal nature of the characters and their actions.

One of the best ways of retaining the ambiguity surrounding the reliability of Hawkes's first-person narrators in his later works is to use two performers, one of whom performs the unreliable side and one of whom performs the reliable side. With Skipper in Second Skin a young person could perform the naive, unsophisticated side, while an older performer (someone close to Skipper's age) portrays his more reliable side. Regarding Cyril in The Blood Oranges, the group might want to use two performers or they might rely on slow motion, lighting effects, or even music when the story is filtered through the mind of Cyril which seems less than reliable.

Whatever the group performance does, their goal is to preserve and feature the ambiguities if at all possible. In some cases they may not be able to find visual or aural ways of totally preserving every indication of ambiguity. In this case they still want to take care not to emphasize one alternative over the other or we will destroy the ambiguity. If they perform certain actions and leave others out, they may actually destroy the equivocal nature of the action. For instance, to end a performance of Travesty with the sound of a car crash would virtually negate the interpretation that

Papa is an unreliable narrator and is really alone and simply plotting in his mind the way he would purge himself of his wife's and daughter's lover. Certainly, a better choice, more in keeping with the equivocal nature of the text, would be to have a quick blackout on the last line and end the production with silence and no curtain call. In this way, the performance leaves unclear whether or not a wreck occurs.

Both group and solo performances can preserve and underline or destroy the ambiguity in John Hawkes's works. Anytime a performer goes beyond the reasonable possibilities of the work and imposes his own choices on the text he crosses over into the world of distortion. Performing Cyril or Skipper or Papa as either totally reliable or unreliable again destroys the inherent ambiguity of the text and thus mitigates the potential value of the ambiguity. We must realize that ambiguity in a work does not end the need for making performance choices; choices become focused into the realm of decisions as to how best to preserve the literature's equivocal nature. Granted, group performance may render some of the actual performing less difficult since it is undoubtedly easier on the performer if he plays either good or bad. With group performance, one way of dealing with the ambiguity would be to use two different performers, whereas with solo performance the interpreter cannot play good and bad at the same time; instead he must make his choice but choose performance techniques that alternately point to one interpretation or the other.

One group production that occurred at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill reveals how group performance can

illuminate and feature the ambiguity in a text.¹ A readers theatre production of Henry James's The Turn of the Screw sought to underscore the ambiguous nature of the text rather than minimize or rationalize it, since, according to the director, the ambiguity was central to the script.² In order to do this, the production used three different narrators each representative of the governess. One narrator took the objective non-involved lines and sat on a platform in center stage. The second narrator-governess represented the possessed or evil side of the governess and sat on a twenty-four inch stool slightly to the left and front of the other narrator. The third narrator representing the good side of the governess sat on an eighteen inch stool slightly to the right and front of the objective narrator. All three narrators were dressed alike and wore their hair in a similar style. The concept behind this approach was that they would form a visual unit.³ Anytime one narrator took over from another, the lines were overlapped to underscore the togetherness of the character facets.

In order to carry forth the ambiguity into the rest of the script, the production also used two sets of children and two

¹Information about this production came from personal correspondence from the advisor-director, Martha Nell Hardy, September 18, 1979.

²Hardy, personal letter.

³Hardy, personal letter. The director of this show told me that the first time she went to rehearsal the three governesses were physically apart. Because they did not overlap physically, the effect did not work.

housekeepers dressed alike. On one side of the narrator trio sat the housekeeper who believed in the innocence of the governess. On the other side sat the housekeeper who believed the governess was evil. The children were arranged similarly with the evil children on the good governess's side. To symbolically underscore their role, they were placed on high stools at the rear of the stage so that they became physically dominant over both the housekeeper and the good governess. On the evil governess's side, the good children sat on the front of the stage at floor level, dominated by the evil governess. Lighting effects were used to represent the ghost of Quint so that his presence was ultimately ambiguous in the minds of the audience. Here we see, then, a good example of how a group performance can feature rather than disambiguate the equivocal nature of the text.

Summary

In terms of performance, our overriding concern remains preserving the ambiguity. If we cannot find ways of featuring it, then we can at least do our best to keep from destroying it. As in all performances, we must embody the text in its entirety, and if that text is ambiguous, then our performance must reflect that. Ambiguity in narrative literature offers challenges to the performer not unlike those afforded by ironic literature. As performers we must come to grips with the why's and how's of ambiguity so that we may continually search out better ways of embodying it. Solo

performers are limited in the sense that they do not have many symbolic performance techniques available to them. Nevertheless, like the group performance, the solo performance must seek ways of preserving the equivocal nature of a narrative if the narrative truly contains ambiguity. The novels of John Hawkes offer ample instances of the how's and why's of ambiguity. The next chapter will take a closer look at his early novels in order to discover and perform their ambiguities.

CHAPTER VI

JOHN HAWKES: THE AMBIGUITY AND PERFORMANCE OF THREE EARLY NOVELS

John Hawkes is one of America's most prolific post World War II writers.¹ This author of poetry, drama, and prose fiction has generated critical reaction nearly as diverse as the response to the concept of ambiguity. This chapter will examine and identify the ambiguity in three short novels which represent his early writings and then consider implications for performing those ambiguities.

Biography

John Clendennin Burne Hawkes, Jr. was born August 17, 1925 in Stamford, Connecticut to John C. B. and Helen Ziefle Hawkes. An asthmatic child, Hawkes moved frequently with his family; he spent his childhood and adolescence in Old Greenwich, Connecticut; Juneau, Alaska; New York, Poughkeepsie, and Paulding, New York. Hawkes frequently resorted to fantasy and daydream in order to escape the real world.² At Harvard University he decided to become a poet. In

¹See bibliography for a complete listing of his writings to date.

²Thomas LeClair, "A Pair of Jacks: John Barth and John Hawkes Gamble With New Fiction," Horizon, November, 1979, p. 66.

1947, while still at Harvard, he married Sophie Goode Tazewell, to whom he gives credit for much of his work.³ They now have four children.

His transition from writing poetry to prose fiction came about through the same kind of irony that plays a part in so many of his novels: while he was soaking his foot one day, his wife offered him a novel to help pass the time. Hawkes read it and said he could do better.⁴ He received his A.B. from Harvard in 1949 and became an assistant to the production manager at Harvard University Press to support his family until 1955. He has since taught English at Harvard University, Brown University, and Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Presently he serves as an associate professor of English at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island. Professional organizations and universities actively seek him as a guest lecturer and writer: he led the novel workshop at the Utah Writers' Conference (1962), was a staff member for the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference (1963), and served as writer-in-residence for the University of Virginia in 1965. In addition he was the special guest at the Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies, director of an experimental writing project at Stanford University, and Visiting Distinguished Professor of Creative Writing at the City College of New York. His many awards

³LeClair, p. 66.

⁴LeClair, p. 66. See also John Kuehl, John Hawkes and the Craft of Conflict (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1975), p. 156.

and honors include an M.A. from Brown University (1962), the Guggenheim fellowship (1962-63), a National Institute of Arts and Letters grant (1962), as well as a Ford Foundation fellowship in theatre (1964-65) and a Rockefeller Foundation Fellowship to travel and write in Europe (1967-68). Through the years he has contributed to dozens of magazines and journals including Wake, Accent, Harvard Advocate, Voices, Sewanee Review, Massachusetts Review, San Francisco Review, and Texas Quarterly.

Chronology of his Writing

Hawkes privately published his short collection of poetry, Fiasco Hall, in 1943. His first short novel Charivari (1949) came about as part of Albert Guerard's creative writing class at Harvard University and was published by New Directions as were all his subsequent novels except The Passion Artist. The Cannibal (1949) was published when Hawkes was only twenty-four years old after his experience as an American Field Service ambulance driver. The Beetle Leg (1951) came next, followed by The Goose on the Grave; The Owl: Two Short Novels in 1954. The Lime Twig (1961) and Second Skin (1964) proved to be a turning point in his career as they marked a change in his narrative technique, and both received greater critical acclaim than his previous works. In 1967 Hawkes published his first dramatic writing, The Innocent Party: Four Short Plays by John Hawkes. In 1969 Lunar Landscapes, a collection of short stories and novels written between 1949 and 1963, made its way into the public eye.

Between 1971 and 1976 Hawkes published his "trilogy" of erotic novels, The Blood Oranges (1971), Death, Sleep & the Traveler (1974), and Travesty (1976). In 1978 the Lord John Press published a personally signed, thirty-six page limited edition called The Universal Fears. His most recent novel is The Passion Artist (1979).

Critical and Public Response to Hawkes

For better or worse the literary establishment has branded Hawkes as "a writer's writer," a label that carries reproach or praise depending upon who uses it. Hawkes occupies a peculiar place in contemporary American literature. Until 1954, a critic described Hawkes as having only "a tense following."⁵ In a preface to The Owl Robert Scholes identifies and summarizes typical critical and public response to John Hawkes:

For over twenty-five years John Hawkes has been a unique voice in American letters. Belonging to no school, following no fashion, he has paid the price exacted of such loners by the literary establishment. He has been reviewed capriciously, embarrassed by unconsidered praise and attacked with ill-tempered venom. His admirers have been mostly his fellow writers, some English teachers, and their students. Recently he has been more honored abroad than at home. For better or worse, he has been taken up by the French, who can see in his writing connections to the surrealists, to Faulkner, and to their own nouveau roman. Perhaps they will teach us to appreciate him, as they taught us to appreciate jazz

⁵S. K. Oberbeck, "John Hawkes: The Smile Slashed by a Razor," Contemporary American Novelists, ed., Harry T. Moore, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1964), p. 193.

music, Edgar Poe, William Faulkner, and the American films of the studio era.⁶

This brief passage points up the diversity John Hawkes the writer has generated in terms of critical and public reaction to his works. The small coterie of fans he has earned through the years cling tenaciously to their view of him as one of the best modern American writers. Yet, he has likewise provoked and survived a barrage of criticism, the like of which might have caused other authors to give up in despair and scurry back to less public careers.

Critical response to Hawkes runs the gamut from unabashed praise to venomous criticism. S. K. Oberbeck, for instance, objects to the lack of popular appeal granted Hawkes since "he writes with deeper talent and conviction"⁷ than many other authors afforded more acclaim. He further asserts that "Hawkes has never been treated by popular publications to the largesse granted such authors as Salinger, Mailer, Bellow, Roth, and Malamud."⁸ And Susan Sontag apparently agrees when she remarks:

For nearly two decades [now four decades] he [Hawkes] has been writing beautiful books which, while enthusiastically acclaimed by a small circle of readers,

⁶ John Hawkes, The Owl, with a Critical Interpretation by Robert Scholes (New York: New Directions, 1977), p. v. Hereafter referred to as The Owl.

⁷ Oberbeck, p. 193.

⁸ Oberbeck, p. 193.

have failed to gain for him the wider recognition he unquestionably deserves.⁹

Thomas McGuane regards Hawkes as "feasibly our best writer."¹⁰ And Donald Greiner, one of the most prominent scholars of Hawkes today, calls him "one of the few truly gifted writers in the so-called black humor movement which has flourished since 1950, . . . [even though] he lacks the renown enjoyed by less talented authors."¹¹ Earl Ganz regards him as an artist "who combines his own vivid perceptions with elements from earlier literatures and other genres so as to present a vision of the world more complete and coherent than that of any of his contemporaries."¹²

Other critics, however, have severely criticized his writing. One of the most venomous attacks comes from Roger Sale, critic for The New York Review of Books. In his review of The Blood Oranges, Sale accuses Hawkes of having "a contemptible imagination,"¹³ and

⁹Susan Sontag, "A New Life for an Old One," review of Second Skin, by John Hawkes, in The New York Times Book Review, April 5, 1964, p. 5.

¹⁰Thomas McGuane, review of The Blood Oranges, by John Hawkes, in The New York Times Book Review, September 19, 1971, p. 1.

¹¹Donald J. Greiner, Comic Terror: The Novels of John Hawkes (Memphis: Memphis State University Press, 1973), p. xi.

¹²Earl Ganz, "The Blood Oranges," Mediterranean Review 2 (Winter 1972): 42.

¹³Roger Sale, "What Went Wrong? The Blood Oranges," review of The Blood Oranges, by John Hawkes, in The New York Review of Books, October 21, 1971, p. 3.

says "Hawkes has always seemed to me more of an unadmitted voyeur of horror than its calm delineator" (p. 3). He admits an awareness of Hawkes's "many admirers" which may indicate he [Sale] has "completely missed the fact that it is all a put-on" (p. 3). But he remains steadfast in his view of Hawkes as he says:

. . . when horror becomes a pastime it should announce itself or at least know itself; . . . when life is insistently joyless it should not be called good, or even particularly tolerable; when people stop mattering to a novelist, the writing will suffer and the writer should stop (p. 3).

Bob Tisdale has taken a different tack in his denouncement of Hawkes as he says:

I'm saying that Hawkes is basically not a good storyteller. When I read, I want to be beguiled, carried along on some viewless wings; I don't want to see the machinery or be continually prodded back into judgment. So if writing the "experimental novel" entails the loss of narrative moxie, I'm against it. If it means trying what hasn't been done successfully before, one has to ask at some point whether there isn't a reason for previous failures. Before I tested myself against Hawkes, I thought I was a literary liberal. Now, while saddened by my limits, I have the conservative's renewed faith in the existence of law if not the necessity of convention.¹⁴

Who, then, reads John Hawkes? Leslie Fiedler says:

Only a few of us, I fear, tempted to pride by our fewness, and ready in that pride to believe that the recalcitrant rest of the world doesn't deserve Hawkes, that we would do well to keep his pleasures our little secret Hawkes may be an unpopular writer, but he is not an esoteric one; for the places he defines

¹⁴Bob Tisdale, "The Flesh Made Words," Carleton Miscellany 14 (Fall/Winter 1973-74): 107.

are the places in which we all live between sleeping and waking, and the pleasures he affords are the pleasures of returning to those places between waking and sleeping.¹⁵

Still, many critics continue to laud Hawkes and have compared him variously to such greats as Faulkner, Kafka, Conrad, Djuna Barnes, Flannery O'Connor, and Nathaniel West.¹⁶ If this is so, then why has the public at large for the most part rejected his writing? In part we can attribute this disdain and general lack of acceptance to his works' innate inaccessibility, especially his early writings, those receiving the most criticism. Hawkes is not easy reading to be sure. Scholars have accurately labeled his writings difficult and obscure.

Too frequently, however, people have criticized Hawkes not for his impenetrable style but for his poetic vision. Called a black humorist, Hawkes, along with his students, has protested the public condemnation of his gothic vision which includes violence, eroticism, and macabre humor, while completely ignoring the problems of his precise structuring and lyrically poetic style.¹⁷ In an

¹⁵Leslie A. Fiedler, "A Lonely American Eccentric: The Pleasures of John Hawkes," The New Leader 43 (December 12, 1960): 12.

¹⁶See, for instance, Peter Brooks, "John Hawkes: Second Skin," Encounter, June 1, 1966, p. 69; Frederick Busch, Hawkes: A Guide to his Fictions (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1973), pp. xvi-xvii; Greiner, p. xviii; McGuane, p. 1.

¹⁷Donald J. Greiner, "The Thematic Use of Color in John Hawkes' Second Skin," Contemporary Literature 11 (Summer 1970): 389; Albert J. Guerard, "The Prose Style of John Hawkes," Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction 6 (Fall 1963): 19.

interview for the Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature

Hawkes recognized that "reviewers in general have concentrated on the grotesque and nightmarish qualities of my work, have made me out to be a somber writer dealing only with pain, perversion, and despair."¹⁸ One critic, David Littlejohn feared Hawkes's "hyper-sensitivity to ugliness, deformity, and decay . . . an insurmountable block to otherwise willing and appreciative readers."¹⁹ Yet Hawkes adamantly defends himself against such claims as he asserts that his writing is not "mere indulgence in violence or derangement"²⁰ and that it is "hardly intended simply to shock."²¹

It isn't that I'm advocating that we live by acts of violence; I, myself, don't want to live the nightmare. It's just that our deepest inner lives are largely organized around such [violent] impulses, which need to be exposed and understood and used. Even appreciated.²²

Hawkes himself leads a conventional life. When questioned about why he thinks his novels so disturb conventional people, Hawkes replied:

¹⁸John Hawkes, "John Hawkes: An Interview," Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature 6 (Summer 1965): 145. Hereafter referred to as WSCL.

¹⁹David Littlejohn, Interruptions (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1970), p. 24.

²⁰WSCL, p. 146.

²¹WSCL, p. 146.

²²John Kuehl, John Hawkes and the Craft of Conflict (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1975), p. 165.

. . . I want my fiction to destroy conventional morality and conventional attitudes. That's part of its purpose--to challenge us in every way possible in order to cause us to know ourselves better and to live with more compassion.²³

And his writing reflects his belief that "We ourselves are the source of everything, the indignities as well as the potentials for beauty, serenity, grace, and so on."²⁴

In fact, Hawkes sees himself as a comic writer. He describes his comic method as one which functions both to create sympathy and compassion and to expose evil and convince the reader he is not exempt from this force:²⁵

I suppose that in one sense comedy is a form of action in which brutality does not reach its ultimate destructiveness; the victim is not totally punished or destroyed. It would seem to me that the highest forms of comedy may not produce laughter--I mean they're coming up to the edge of laughter and then giving us a kind of light. High comedy simply produces a sense of harmony and lyric unity. I find the subject hard to talk about.²⁶

Nevertheless, what he calls a technique of "comic distortion" others regard as perversity and exploitation.

Besides the criticism over his vision, Hawkes has similarly received condemnation for the extreme obscurity of his novels. And truly his works are difficult. First of all, Hawkes habitually withholds narrative information and shuffles events in time so they

²³Kuehl, p. 157.

²⁴Kuehl, p. 161.

²⁵WSCL, p. 146.

²⁶Kuehl, p. 173.

no longer retain any readily perceivable chronological order.

Oberbeck provides insight into this technical aspect of Hawkes's work:

He throws the map-hungry reader delicious bits of abusive, brilliant detail and will for pages toss out the false scents that send readers stumbling past his true authorial intentions like a shipwreck chasing his own footprints. His rigid consistency of tone and language leaves readers panting, breathless and dismayed.²⁷

Robert I. Edenbaum explains that Hawkes's novels, full of unexplained events, untold histories, and characters who seem to have no logical psychological motivations, leave the reader with questions that have no answers. The novels thus leave the reader unsatisfied if he expects answers but will satisfy the reader who realizes no answers exist.²⁸ Douglas Dunn has suggested that part of the difficulty arises as a result of Hawkes's extremely fertile imagination:

My feeling is . . . that complication and extremity are characteristics of Hawkes's imagination, that he cares so much for the use of imagination that he prefers mystery and uncertainty over the clear and precise. His novels proceed not by sequential unfoldings of information, by progressive, careful movements towards giving the reader "satisfactory" information or 'plot.' Instead they work by moving backwards and forwards in time, with vague illuminations carefully divulged at chosen points in the narrative. The

²⁷Oberbeck, p. 196.

²⁸Robert I. Edenbaum, "John Hawkes, The Lime Twig and Other Tenuous Horrors," Massachusetts Review 7 (Summer 1966): 471.

impression is more one of tentative discoveries made by the reader than of clever intrusions by an omniscient author. There is no effect of things falling into place according to some pattern devised for "suspense" beforehand, but of a narrative shaped by imagination.²⁹

Several critics agree with this view and further posit that the difficulties awaiting the reader result from Hawkes's unusual writing techniques. Earl Ganz has perceptively compared Hawkes to the painter Brueghel:

If you wish to understand John Hawkes, a painter friend once told me, think of Brueghel. It was all my friend had to say on the subject but it was enough. Almost immediately the Hawkes' novel I was then reading snapped into focus: the quick scenes, the small characters, non-existent psychology, might-makes-right morality, the plot that was no plot at all but a kind of rhythm or dance. It seemed that all these effects were the result of a certain medieval distance, of a certain kind of hovering point-of-view that is one of the trademarks of the great Flemish painter.³⁰

Whereas most novelists arrange their novels in a linear manner with occasional flashbacks, Hawkes begins not with the unfolding of the story, but with strong images that he subsequently develops into scenes which connect only after the novel ends. The movement of his narrative is what Earl Rovit calls "painterly" rather than linear:

. . . it descends deep, it radiates outward in concentric swirls of acquisition, it gathers into itself even as it descends, composing larger and larger areas of emotional swell and significance. And our response

²⁹Douglas Dunn, "John Hawkes: A Profile," The New Review 1 (March 1975): 28.

³⁰Ganz, p. 42.

is thus both an acceptant violation and a liberating release which undercuts rationality and idea. It is only art at its most subversive and shocking and rejuvenating that can call up such a response.³¹

Seymour Chatman in discussing narrative structure reminds us that events in a true narrative manifest a discernible organization.³² Though difficult to discern, the organization in Hawkes's novels clearly exists. However, structure in Hawkes's novels is based not upon chronologically ordered events precipitated by logically motivated characters, but upon imagistic "cross-references, parallels, and contrasts."³³ Problems arise frequently because readers fail to "give in" to this structure and, as a result, their expectations clash with the work.

Hawkes's work is difficult and I contend that in part, ambiguity contributes to this difficulty. Unlike the ambiguity of Henry James or Herman Melville, Hawkes's ambiguity grows out of a vision molded by the post World War II influences that have pervaded the works of many modern writers labeled anti-realistic and experimental. The ambiguity in Hawkes's works engages the reader as an active collaborator of the work. We cannot designate all of Hawkes's works as ambiguous. Many, however, contain devices similar to those

³¹Earl Rovit, "The Fiction of John Hawkes: An Introductory View," Modern Fiction Studies 11 (Summer 1964): 152.

³²Seymour Chatman, Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), p. 21.

³³Greiner, "Thematic Color," p. 389.

discussed in the previous chapter. Some of these devices function consistently as temporary information-withholding gaps throughout his works. In some cases, Hawkes introduces gaps that he completes as much as one hundred pages after their introduction. Other devices lead to ambiguity which render his works difficult to fathom, yet worth the time it takes to penetrate them. It is not the intention of this chapter to prove that ambiguity permeates all of Hawkes's works, rather to identify and examine clearly ambiguous examples and see how performance can better illuminate them.

For convenience in discussing the ambiguity in his work, we can group his novels into his early, extremely experimental ones and his later works which apparently have progressed toward more surface realism, thereby becoming more accessible but no less controversial. The rest of this chapter will examine his early works and their ambiguity as they raise questions about performance.

The Ambiguity of Three Early Hawkes Novels

Charivari (1949), The Cannibal (1949), The Beetle Leg (1951), and The Goose on the Grave; The Owl (1954) are all marked by Hawkes's extreme rejection of realism. Hawkes has on several occasions called traditional devices of realism such as plot, character, and setting "enemies" of the novel. In an interview Hawkes stated:

My novels are not highly plotted, but certainly they're elaborately structured. I began to write fiction on the assumption that the true enemies of the novel were plot, character, setting, and theme, and having once abandoned these familiar ways of thinking about fiction,

totality of vision or structure was really all that remained. And structure--verbal and psychological coherence--is still my largest concern as a writer. Related or corresponding event, recurring image and recurring action, these constitute the essential substance or meaningful density of my writing. However, as I suggested before, this kind of structure can't be planned in advance but can only be discovered in the writing process itself. The success of the effort depends on the degree and quality of consciousness that can be brought to bear on fully liberated materials of the unconscious. I'm trying to hold in balance poetic and novelistic methods in order to make the novel a more valid and pleasurable experience.³⁴

Each of the aforementioned books in some way illustrates this view. In them we see that he ignores or dismisses elements normally viewed as a necessity in most prose fiction. Instead, Hawkes structures his novels through time warpings, dislocations of place and time, and settings which seem both fantastic and real; he also withholds information normally considered necessary in narratives. Nevertheless, even his earliest writings do not totally abandon plot, character, and setting, so we cannot dismiss them as totally anti-realistic works. According to Robert Scholes, "Because he starts with images rather than with a story, his work is different from conventionally plotted fiction, though this is not the same thing as being without plot altogether."³⁵

At times, Hawkes's early novels seem more confusing and indirect than ambiguous. However, three novels Charivari, The Beetle Leg, and

³⁴WSCL, p. 149.

³⁵The Owl, p. vi.

The Goose on the Grave, do contain ambiguity which functions at the level of the narrative structure. A predominant trait of Hawkes's writing is his refusal to tell a story directly. Frederick Busch describes his writing as poetic as well as indirect:

In none of his works thus far has he employed traditional straightforward narrative techniques. From the outset, he has used interior monologue, a diversity of plot-lines, and a thorough disregard for unities of time, place, and person. He often presents his prose fiction almost as juxtaposed fragments of speech and movement, . . . [H]e presents a mélange of people, places, and things--much as does, say Eliot, in his Waste Land, Prufrock, or Gerontion.³⁶

This trait runs consistently throughout all of his works, but is most pronounced in his early novels. His teacher and friend Albert J. Guerard observed in the preface to The Cannibal that Hawkes leaves behind a very interesting story which is "obscured by brilliant detail, . . . and by a very distinct reluctance . . . to tell a story directly we have the effect of a solitary flashlight playing back and forth over a dark and cluttered room; the images may be sharp ones, but a casual reference to some major happening may be clarified only fifty or a hundred pages later."³⁷ This image captures one of Hawkes's distinct traits as a writer, indirection, which alerts the reader to search for any new clue that may render more lucid what he has read. In this way reading an early Hawkes

³⁶Busch, p. 59.

³⁷John Hawkes, The Cannibal, with an Introduction by Albert J. Guerard (New York: New Directions, 1949), p. ix.

novel is much like putting together the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. Because Hawkes poses a question and then either waits or never provides an answer, the effect of ambiguity is curiously cumulative. We can examine his first novel, Charivari, to see how he creates both the ambiguity and apparent confusion.

Charivari

Hawkes completed Charivari in Albert J. Guerard's creative writing class at Harvard University. For the most part, it received little acclaim as critics generally branded it confusing. The public, like the critics, responded negatively. Nevertheless, we can focus on this novel, as it reflects many devices contained in his other early works. Charivari reflects Hawkes's vision of life as a fragmented, chaotic world full of inexplicable events and occurrences. Written after Hawkes's return from field service in Europe during World War II, the novel depicts people rendered wasted and sterile by the war. The story charts the events in a weekend in the lives of a middle-aged couple, Emily and Henry Van, who are expecting their first child. An omniscient third-person consciousness narrates the story and several ambiguities arise through clearly definable techniques. The first ambiguity concerns the identity of a girl Henry sees when he visits a seashore town; the second concerns Emily's pregnancy itself; and the third ambiguity, which really controls the other ambiguities, concerns whether or not Henry and Emily ever

leave their house during this sequence of events. Before we focus on these specific ambiguities, though, we need to discuss the novel itself.

Throughout the years, Hawkes has repeatedly denied belonging to certain avant-garde literary schools. Nevertheless, critics repeatedly foist upon him such labels as absurdist, existentialist, and anti-realist. And frequently critics have lumped him with the surrealist movement, which devotes itself to the study and depiction of dreams and hallucinations, and practices subconsciously dictated "automatic" writing. Though Hawkes admits to an admiration for the philosophical genesis of this school, in an interview with John Kuehl he denied belonging to it:

I appreciate being identified with the surrealists, but at the same time resist that identification because I don't think it's very applicable. There's nothing merely murky or dreamlike about my fiction, and it's not a matter of unconscious flow or automatic writing. I'm interested in highly shaped and perfected works of art in which the language and everything in the fiction have to achieve a certain intensity and rightness. The prose in Charivari is highly poetic and that short novel is, I guess, the closest to surrealist writing that I've done. Charivari probably contains more unrevised unconscious content than anything else I've written.³⁸

Further, Hawkes stated that very few literal dreams exist in Charivari (p. 181). Instead, he prefers to think of them as "dreamlike moments":

³⁸Kuehl, p. 180. All unidentified page numbers in the following section refer to this edition.

The moments . . . are simply mythical actualities. The difference has to do with the degree of coldness and detachment and ruthlessness in controlling and shaping the material. Paradoxically, soon after I began to write, I knew that I wanted to keep the reader out of the fictional experience, wanted to resist the reader so that he would participate more fully. Surrealism, to me, suggests a kind of indulgence or letting go, the creation of an amorphous world. My fictions at best are hardly amorphous. They are highly textured, but the images and violence are crisply created, sharply done.³⁹

Hawkes, then, seems to object more to being identified with a certain technique than its result. And while Charivari certainly contains highly textured sharp images, it nevertheless sustains a dreamlike quality throughout the novel that renders certain aspects ambiguous.

As the novel opens, Henry and Emily lie sleeping and dreaming in separate rooms--their separation further emphasized by the guard dog which "patrols" the hall in-between their rooms. Suddenly, Hawkes "plunks" us down in the midst of Henry's dream in which he converses with the "Expositor," the controlling force of the dream. Here, we first experience one device Hawkes continually exploits (the dream) as he allows us to eavesdrop in on this bizarre dream conversation:

Expositor: What time is it, Henry?

Henry: Four o'clock.

Expositor: What should you be doing?

Henry: I should be counting my gold.

Expositor: Nonsense. You should be out cleaning the stables. Come on; we'll take you to clean the stables.

³⁹Kuehl, p. 181.

Henry: Must I do it with my hands?
 Expositor: Certainly. What do you see lying over there
 in the hay?
 Henry: A woman.
 Expositor: What is she doing?
 Henry: Making love to the stable boy while I do his work.
 Expositor: Do you notice anything different?
 Henry: Yes, she has a baby in her arms.
 Expositor: What do you have to do now?
 Henry: I have to put it in a bucket of water and keep it
 there so she can go on making love.
 Expositor: Do you think you can keep it from jumping
 out and biting you?
 Henry: I can't. It's going to bite, it's going to bite!
 I'll run away. I'm going to run, run . . .
 Expositor: I'll turn you into the drowning baby if you
 do, Henry . . .
 Henry: I'm drowning. Help me, help me . . .⁴⁰

This dream sequence introduces us to the kind of structuring that is so much a part of Hawkes's early writing. Hawkes juxtaposes confusing and apparently unrelated events and combines them with nonsensical conversations which appear unmotivated. In this instance the dream structure itself provides a kind of "excuse" for the apparent nonsense of this passage, but later we discover a continued commingling of stark reality and bizarre, imagined fantasy. Abrupt unexplained switches from reality to fantasy such as these cause a sense of vertigo in the reader as if he were slightly off balance. The sense of confusion that arises works well within the created reality of Charivari, though it has garnered extreme disapproval. Certainly, these switches prove difficult to follow. Nevertheless,

⁴⁰ John Hawkes, Lunar Landscapes: Stories & Short Novels, 1949-1963 (New York: New Directions, 1969), pp. 51-52. All unidentified page numbers referring to Charivari and The Goose on the Grave refer to this edition.

they introduce one of the amazing traits of Hawkes's creative ability: continual juxtapositioning of two different types of reality which work artistically. In Charivari, for instance, Hawkes uses purely creative settings, or what Oberbeck has called "landscapes with no real counterpart in the conscious world. They are so skillful a mixture of the real and the imagined that readers can barely notice any separations."⁴¹ Busch notes that in particular in Charivari the reader has difficulty in distinguishing the real world from the dream world. In fact, he notes "in the context of the novel and its hallucination characters, dream and a possible physical actuality are inseparable."⁴² Let us consider this technique more closely by examining further the basic plot of the novel.

Henry and Emily are apparently having an anniversary. Without conversation, Emily "announces" that guests will arrive by a note tacked to the wall which reads "'dinner at one'" (p. 53). The rest of the story provides glimpses of the party guests--an odd assortment of revelers who stay at the Vans' house for the remainder of the action. The meaning of the title helps to clarify the framework of the novel. The Oxford English Dictionary defines "charivari" as "a serenade of 'rough music,' with kettles, pans, tea-trays, and the like, used in France in mockery and derision of incongruous or

⁴¹Oberbeck, p. 197.

⁴²Busch, p. 15. However, Hawkes has objected to this labeling of his work as surrealistic. See also Kuehl, p. 180.

unpopular marriages and of unpopular people generally." The Random House Dictionary further defines "charivari" as a "headache." Both meanings fit well in the context of the novel. For Emily and Henry the pregnancy is a headache, one finally terminated. In addition, the anniversary party guests function much as noisy revelers who mock and deride the couple that societal norms dictate they should honor.⁴³

The novel shifts between the action at the party, Emily's and Henry's parents' reaction to her news, and inexplicable sequences which take Henry and Emily away from the action of the party to strangely depicted locales. At one point, for example, Henry leaves the party for an unnamed seashore town. Why he leaves, where he goes, or whether he is only dreaming are questions Hawkes leaves unanswered. Here, then, ambiguities arise not because two or more interpretations are supported by many clues but because the very lack of clues invites us to entertain these several possibilities. En route to the town Henry sees a young woman he thinks is Emily:

He looked back again at the woman with the black hat.
Emily? (p. 77).

And later when he is settling down in his rented room:

He stood by the window watching the sea when his eye was caught by a movement in the street below; a woman was entering a low building holding a small black hat from the wind and carrying a bundle of fruit--she, a

⁴³ According to Dr. Clinton Bradford, however, in America the concept of "shivaree" has no pejorative connotations. In fact, he says it is "the total antithesis of 'headache.'" But note, too, that the setting of Charivari is England and not America.

bartered, mythical bride, vaporous Emily. It was a slanting sea-green house with a steep-pitched roof, and she went in through the back door. Henry pulled the blind and flung his body on the bed. He pulled the lumpy quilt up over his head, brought his knees up to his stomach and fell asleep (p. 80).

Because of the construction of this passage, a residue of the dream structure haunts our minds. And later when Henry again goes to the window he once more sees his "bride-elect":

He went to the window and let the shade up; it stuck, got out of hand, went up with a bang and rolled angrily for a moment. Excitement. He was not sure whether Emily was across the street or not. He peered through the wet glass, go out, go out to play he thought, and his forehead touched the cold surface. Then he saw the lighted window. She sat looking out, still wearing the little black hat, a phantom bride-elect. She simply sat motionless watching the rain. Henry felt that the time was fast approaching when his eyes would fasten onto her and hold, when he would speak. The life-giving color of the sea turned deeper and spray flew high from the slimy rocks. One more look at her in the window, her hands awaiting the calla lilies, and he went downstairs (p. 82).

And again, after the intervention of several pages, Hawkes reminds us of this phantom Emily:

The door opened and she came out and walked easily into the storm. For a moment she was but thirty feet from him. Miraculously the black hat stayed in place. He could almost see the features of the face, oh, Emily, yes, yes, the howling wind, . . . the eyes covered by a constant veil, the hair beating upon the open throat (p. 88).

At no point does the undramatized third-person narrator commit himself to a definitive, positive identification of this woman as Emily. Instead, he suggests the possibility that the woman is Emily through the four passages cited above. But if we reexamine these four

passages, we notice that Hawkes nowhere offers clues which will support either interpretation--that she is Emily or that she is not. Thus Hawkes creates this ambiguity, first of all, through gaps--he withholds information that would tell us the identity of the woman. Clearly, at this point, the possibility exists that the woman is Emily, but we cannot know for sure, especially since other scenes indicate she is still at the party. We are not even sure the woman is reality or merely a confused dream, as she is described almost spectre-like. Nevertheless, we cannot dismiss any passage as only fantasy, since the foundation of reality clearly exists.

Several pages intervene before the text resolves the identity of the woman. We learn that this young woman in the black hat has drowned:

Her black hat was caught under her head. The body was half twisted around one of the piles. She was put into the stretcher and rope was laced, criss-cross, up the front like a jacket. The face was pushed down under an arm. Pounding of the surf. They began to pull the ropes from up on the pier (p. 92).

We cannot say for sure it is the same woman previously described, or if that woman was Emily, or even if Henry saw anyone, because of the element of fantasy present throughout the text. And because the dream structuring exists, the possibility exists that no drowning occurred. Instead, Hawkes has duped us into a search for the unanswerable, creating a sense of ambiguity, forcing us into active participation with the text. Hawkes fills his works with this kind of indirectness reminiscent of the incomplete reversal described in

Chapter IV. We become victims of the book because our frustration parallels that of the characters. Lest we assume it is a game and Hawkes is willfully toying with us, we should remember that this assaulting of our sensibilities is consistent with his poetic vision--one that regards life as too complex and chaotic ever to render every detail completely lucidly. But because there is always an element of reality intermixed with the most hallucinatory of scenes, we cannot dismiss even this very experimental work as mere ravings. Hawkes denies the use of conventional devices of realism, yet even Charivari retains sporadic moments of plot, character, and setting which make it work on several levels. Hawkes, then, uses natural laws, but obliterates them before our eyes and dupes us. Thus we cannot classify Hawkes's work as strict surrealism or anti-realism. The definite narrative pulse which forces the action forward creates a sense of reality, and the commingling of different levels of dream and reality creates inexplicable and ambiguous events.

Concomitant with this technique is a device he uses more and more in later books, the dislocation of time and place. His stories are not told in chronological order. Instead, he moves beyond flashbacks or associational structuring to a kind of "insistence"⁴⁴ of different times and places into coexistence. For example in Charivari, we view Henry first at his party, then at a seashore town. But within

⁴⁴Busch, p. 23.

the section which focuses on his seashore interlude, we see him at an inn with beer buddies. We suddenly realize that we are now at his bachelor party. Logic dictates that this is an impossibility, since he has been married for years. Hawkes leaves unclear whether the bachelor party exists in reality or only in Henry's mind, spurred by the surrounding events. Hawkes does this several times in this novel: at one point he returns the action to Emily and Henry's wedding day; later he thrusts Emily into a nightmarish physical examination presumably related to her pregnancy (though we cannot be sure). This device helps to reinforce and identify the ambiguity of the woman. These switches between fantasy and reality occur so often and are so skillfully done that nowhere can the reader positively discern whether the entire novel is dream or reality. This device becomes a major force in Charivari and becomes quite significant in terms of ambiguity. In other words, the setting of Charivari (one of the levels of the narrative at which ambiguity can arise) functions to create the overall ambiguity and confusion of the entire novel. Here, we can argue that the setting is purely realistic, purely imagined (in the characters' heads), or both. Thus three distinct possibilities arise and Hawkes weaves the primary setting--the Vans' house--with the dream settings so that we cannot positively separate them. The narrative technique of using temporary and permanent gaps, dislocations of time and place, and switches between reality and dream all disallow our knowing if the setting is purely real or purely dream. We can

examine several instances which support this ambiguity. First is the opening dream sequence cited earlier which sets up the framework for the novel. Later that evening the text continues the imagery as it describes Emily's dream:

1:30 A.M. Emily's dream.

She was a little girl, nine years old, walking through the forest.

Expositor: Where are you going, little girl?

Emily: I'm going to grandmother's funeral.

Expositor: And what will you do there?

Emily: I'll say goodbye.

The archetypes stood around the room in black and white, the moon shone through the window, red trees surrounded the house. Father was a stern man with shiny insignia on his shoulders, and mother looked as if she would cry. The organ was caroling very softly.

Expositor: You have come a long way.

Emily: Yes. But now I am here to see grandmother. She is a very lovely lady. I would like to give her a kiss. The little girl crept up to the bier, pushing her way through gardens of flowers. She held one of the cool hands as the minister's sonorous voice began the farewell. All of the people lost their names in tribute to beautiful grandmother. All of their quiet breaths together seemed like the breathing of the sleeping woman. She waxed and waned. I leave all my children.

Then a little bell tinkled and everyone began to put on their hats (p. 75).

Here, Hawkes continues the dream imagery but makes the dream so realistic in some ways that the dream and reality again coexist.

Soon after this sequence, in the second section of the novel entitled "The Bachelors," the narrator tells us of Henry who is no longer at the party:

Hatless Henry flagged the bus. Its yellow eyes bore down in the mist with steaming silhouettes behind the smoked glass. The silhouettes were clothed in blue

and gray. No one talked to the driver. A few looked up at the new passenger; he smiled and reached to the cash box.

"Look at da babe in da corner."

"Look at da babe."

"Look at dat babe."

A young woman holding a wet bundle sat in the corner. Her eyes were shaded by a little black hat, a hat above the pointed skull of a Jezebel.

Henry dropped his coin into the box and braced himself against the steel stanchions. He heard the wheels churning the mud (p. 77).

Hawkes offers no explanation as to why Henry left the party, or even if he really did. This could be another dream and Henry could be safely at home. Or this passage might be a flashback which occurred in Henry's earlier life. Hawkes gives no clear indications, though he suggests all those possibilities.

The next section of the novel, however, suggests that Henry did physically leave the party. We return to the party and learn that:

Revelry fluctuated all night long; a single laugh would ring out; someone would become temporarily excited and so stir the whole party awake again. Then silence, water running, the sound of "Sleepytime Gal," "The Lambeth Walk," "That's My Baby," the sound of flesh, oh, get out, and back to silence, with the curtain of rain. They were celebrating, though they never knew it, of course, while Henry wandered far and Emily stayed alone (p. 83).

This is further corroborated, when, on the next morning Emily asks a guest, the "adventuress in green," where Henry is:

"What's going on this morning?" she [Emily] asked.

"Not a damn thing now. Most of them are still half dead . . ."

"Some more coffee, darling?" The adventuress held the little pot.

"Thank you. . . . Have you seen Henry?"

"Who?" A pause. "Oh, Vanny. He went out for a walk last night, a long one. He's still gone."

"He'll probably come back soon. But he's never done this before. Oh, well, I won't worry." She looked up brightly. "Today we'll have fun" (pp. 85-86).

But when once again Hawkes switches us to the seashore landscape, he suggests the dream setting:

The wind pulled the door from his hands and slammed it shut. Conversation died. He stood facing the fire, trying to collect his excitement, to hold his spirit down here in the Sea Horse, a timeless inn. Wooden tables and benches were worn smooth and white and around them were massive red flickering faces.

"How d'ya do. A rum for the gentleman, Jim."

He sat down next to the big capt'n with the silver mug. The heat of the fire curled round his ankles. The ship's bell tolled five bells; it was dark outside.

There were no women at the inn. Absence of long hair, pale skin, tapering legs, and Piccadilly voices; no childish heads in dusting caps, no Eve dressed in leaves or slinking in spangles, no perfume, nothing for the bees to buzz about.

Quite the contrary, it was a place of stags (p. 89).

This scene seems clearly to indicate that Henry is away from the party and at an inn. But the word "timeless" early in the paragraph suggests the dreamlike quality that permeates the entire novel:

Fat men had their vests unbuttoned, gray wrinkled shirt-tails crumpled out from the tight waistlines, toothless or even gumless, jowls were stained with the iodine tint of nicotine. A few of the very old wore pairs of small, round, gold eyeglasses; they constantly squinted and wiped their heavy faces with their hands. The masculine chamber, with spittle, beef and beer, the roaring fire, stench of drying cloth, the pungent odor of burnt-out pipes, and a boar's head on the wall, moth-eaten. Here models of ships were hung in dirty bottles, a keg of ale with a brass spigot was green, the paintings of fish and fisherman hung crooked in the shadows. Coat tails high, backs to

the flames, in forgotten rough voices the old bucks grumbled. Stags. Out of the storm.

Stags. The work stuck in Henry's mind. Men, gathered congenially to talk, to smoke, fat hands holding the claws of chairs, grew old; . . . (pp. 89-90).

A later paragraph opens with a sentence which suggests that Henry recalls his bachelor party as a result of the environmental stimuli. But if we closely examine the structure of the passage, we notice that it weaves occurrences at the seashore inn with happenings of the recalled bachelor party in such a way that posits the multiple meanings:

Gaylor had thrown a party for him the night before his wedding. Giant candelabra, evening dress, thin cigarettes, leaders of the western world, they came to a private dining room in a large hotel. Slender glasses, medals on black lapels, discreet waiters and they told their jokes. "That was a good one. Hear! Hear!" Red beef, cut with a sword-like carving knife for the fops, grew cold. Men together only for the show.

"Here's to Henry as he starts out on the sea."

"We'll drink to that!" Dinner jackets open, cigars, they tried to be informal with bald heads and tales of espionage. Henry had felt rather shy, Gaylor was very happy, claret, white wine, brandy, stories of first nights, the hunting of the virgin, expensive and false, glittering.

"To the master, may he rule with an iron fist."

Loud laughter.

"Beat her if you have to, Henry," more laughter (p. 90).

Clearly, the use of the past tense and the change in descriptions of the men, would seem to indicate that no ambiguity exists. However, we should notice how the end of the description of the stag party leads right back to the scene at the seashore:

"Beat her if you have to, Henry," more laughter.
Hand-shaking. Pomp. Good fellow.

He had felt terrible the next day and couldn't remember very much but millions on millions of lights.

"But," thought Henry, "this is my stag party." An old man fell to snoring. It was the party of a few healthy chuckles and grunted cackles. In the silence these oldsters seemed to say, "Be of good cheer, be of good cheer, lad, your wedding night is still to come." It was all for him, the old granddads were giving him this, a stag party. Survivors of the sea, a little group of Ulysses' men with albatrosses hung round their necks. Henry felt as if the bouquet and sword were in his hand. He, the man with the returned spirit, would find her waiting, dressed in rose, a simple rosary around her throat.

The big man with the silver mug took another drink.

"C'mon, lad, drink up."

Henry gulped the hot liquor. "Thanks," he said.

The rain came down harder, but the wind was letting up. Rain coming mournfully down. A stag party. Another drink. Happiness (pp. 90-91).

Because we have the immediate transition from the "recalled" stag party to this seashore inn stag party, it is difficult to tell which is real and which is imagined. The line "this is my stag party" placed where it is especially obscures the "correct" meaning.

The stag party ends with the news that the woman has drowned:

Suddenly the door flew open with a gust of rain. A little white, frightened, wet face, partly hidden under a large sou'wester, poked in.

"Drowned," it yelled.

"Drowned," in a high voice above the sound of the rain.

"Drowned. A girl is drowned." The head bobbed out of sight and scurried away in the rain. . . .

Another head popped in, excited:

"C'mon, down by the pier. Girl dead." He ran off.

The door had been left open and puddles of rainwater were forming on the floor. The stag party for the groom-to-be was robed with black, but none of them seemed bereaved. A last large tumbler of rum, or blowing the foam off beer, slowly with pale blue eyes over the

mugs. Then they filed out of the door. Henry turned up his collar and, flanked by stoop-shouldered figures, trudged out into the rain (p. 91).

These passages, then, suggest several possible interpretations.

First, Henry is at an inn and the events prod his memory to recall his own stag party. He then "transfers" the real stag party of years past to the present. In this way the present time and the past commingle only in Henry's mind. However, the structure of the text also suggests that the entire incident is occurring only in Henry's mind because of the use of changing tenses and language. Hawkes has, through mixing dream and reality, created an ambiguity.

The next major section of the novel entitled "The Wedding" again suggests the commingling of fantasy or dream and reality as we witness Henry and Emily's nuptials including the fitting of tuxedo to the groom and the dress to the bride, and even the ceremony itself. The final section of the book "Rhythm" again interweaves past, present, fantasy, and reality. The most obvious example is the scene in which Emily undergoes a bizarre, ritualistic medical examination:

Emily tried to shut the babies from her mind, but, her eyes closed, the black heads multiplied, bobbed faster, and swarmed over her from behind the mesh. She ran, white card smacking The green door jerked open, leather fingers wound about Emily's arm and a coughing man, spasmodic face below a bright reflector, spoke in her ear. "Come in, Emily," said Dr. Smith.

The room was empty except for a narrow angular white table, a dull overhead light, and a few belts, trusses, and bulbs piled below a dark grilled window. Girders, riveters, and a red sky were muraled on the walls, and the shrill whistle of tugs struck her ears. Light, broken through the grillwork, shot in frenzied beams over the scraped floors, and the glare of acetylene torches flashed

from the curving hook in the doctor's hand. "What seems to be the trouble?" he asked.

"Christ," said one of the riveters, "Spike catches dem red hot hunks in his bare hands, pounds 'em into de box wit his fist" (pp. 130-131).

The scene continues with more juxtapositioning of dialogue from Emily, the doctor, and the riveter:

The doctor stropped a scalpel, looked at the woman from the side of his head.

"A child," said Emily, "I'm going to have a baby. With a black head. I want to know when . . ." She saw the first riveter look at her in contempt, black glaring eyes. She wept.

"Now, now," said Dr. Smith, "it's not as bad as all that."

"Smack the god damned thing wi' a hammer, quick," shouted the second riveter. The steam hissed.

"Here," said Smith, "Let me take a look."

"Oh, no," she said. She put her hands over her skirt. The furnace roared, flames leapt from the hot box, parched tongues shriveled over the molten steel.

"Let me see."

"Oh, no." A whistle screeched.

With a violent effort he heaved her onto the table and Emily felt the broad flat straps falling over her body, needles jabbing into her arms.

"Drive the damn thing in," screamed the riveter.

The examination began (pp. 131-32).

Again, the confusing, imagistic diction defies analysis and suggests the dream structuring. Emily may only be having a nightmare; or the experience may be real, but filtered through Emily's exaggerated perspective.

An earlier passage describes Emily's car ride to the hospital in a surrealistic manner. We learn that she has been kidnapped by "old ladies, veils down and bearskin across their knees" (p. 123).

There ensues a violent, racing, car ride with Emily blindfolded and held down by two women. We learn at the end of the passage that Emily's own mother and mother-in-law have kidnapped her. A particularly interesting passage ties the description of Emily here to the mystery woman that has surfaced and disappeared throughout Henry's sojourn at the seashore:

She [Emily] wanted to scratch her nose beneath the veil, but each of her wrists was pinioned at her side by firm unrelaxing fingers. The blindfold pressed into her eyes and the little ribbons in her hair were squashed down under the black hat (p. 123-24).

Surely, the reference to the black hat is not unintentional and ties Emily the wife to Emily the "bride-elect" who drowned.

When Henry and Emily are next seen together we learn that Emily is no longer pregnant. Here again, the ambiguity arises. The narrator offers us the privileged information of Henry's thoughts as he sees Emily running across their lawn about to play croquet:

When she ran across the lawn, hair loose and flying, colored skirt whirling about her knees, he knew that she was not going to have a child (p. 136).

We know only, then, that Emily will no longer have the child. As we examine clues within the text we can nowhere find out whether she had an abortion (for even the bizarre medical exam does not bear this out) or a miscarriage. Indeed, as we reexamine the text we realize we cannot even be sure that she was ever truly pregnant, not because the narrator is unreliable, but because he withholds this information. The various interpretations, then, remain ambiguous.

Thus the novel weaves together past and present, imagined and real, in such a way that the reader cannot positively say if Henry and Emily ever left their house. Certainly, someone can make a strong case for the fact that Henry does physically leave the house and that it is through his own memories that we see his bachelor party. Similarly, Emily may have gone to an examination. But the construction of the novel defies knowing absolutely which interpretation is correct. This major gap in the narrative effects and reinforces the ambiguities concerning the identity of the woman at the seashore and Emily's pregnancy.

Another device that enables the creation of ambiguity in Hawkes's early works is stereotyping or parodying of his characters. All of the characters in Charivari are in some way stereotypes, almost caricatures. In Charivari we find a caricature of the hen-pecked husband, domineering wife, interfering in-laws, and boisterous party guests. Hawkes places these characters in a world at once starkly real and vividly hallucinogenic. As a result, their innate stereotypic qualities clash with both the dreamlike world and the real world. He forces our attention to the unmotivated actions of otherwise predictable characters. This reliance on "typical" characters to perform atypical actions continues throughout his early works.

Thus in Charivari the individual ambiguities and the overall ambiguity is created through commingling of dream and reality,

past and present, gaps within the narrative, indirection, and character stereotyping.

The Beetle Leg

The Beetle Leg is Hawkes's parody of the American western novel. More accessible than Charivari, this is the story of Mulge Lampson, a man accidentally buried in a landslide during construction of a dam somewhere in the American West and the effect of his death on all those people who knew him. Generally, the novel was not well received. Hawkes was praised for brief flashes of lyricism but criticized for being pretentious.⁴⁵

This is the only early Hawkes book set in America.⁴⁶ Strangely enough, the entire novel centers on Mulge even though he died before the action begins. In fact, he is a part of the action only in the opening monologue of the sheriff, who recalls the first time he saw Mulge. The story comes to us through a third-person omniscient narrator who frequently enters the mind of Luke Lampson, Mulge's younger brother. According to Frederick Busch, this novel is a parody of the water-god myth which examines a town's reaction to Mulge's death and their subsequent deification of him:

⁴⁵See, for instance, William Pfaff, review of The Beetle Leg, by John Hawkes, in Commonweal, January 25, 1952, p. 407 and Robert Raynolds, "Landscapes in Purgatory," review of The Beetle Leg, by John Hawkes, in The New York Times, December 30, 1951, sec. 7, p. 12.

⁴⁶A more recent book, Death, Sleep & the Traveler may be set in America. It is difficult to tell.

The Beetle Leg seems to be a . . . systematic enactment of the myth of the god-in-the-water whose death renders crops barren and whose resurrection means life for his wasted land

The thought, then, is that Mulge, somehow sacrificed to his desert people's effort to control their environment and make their crops fertile, is extension of his people's talismanic urge, their good-luck piece and god-in-the-water at once.⁴⁷

The title The Beetle Leg is a colloquial unit of measurement indicating the minute movement downward each year of the landslide which entombs Mulge.

In this novel, we again encounter stereotypic characters. In fact, here, the characters are more parodies of stereotypic characters themselves. For instance, the sheriff is so determined to uphold the law that he pays local children to spy on community members and report back to him. The doctor, normally portrayed as an innocuous, loveable old coot, in Hawkes's rendition becomes the town outcast, accepted and revered only by the nearby Indian community.

One of the best conceived of the stereotypes is Ma, Mulge's widow, who now lives with his brother, Luke. Ma's sole joy in life comes through her imitation of the long-suffering American pioneer woman.⁴⁸

⁴⁷Busch, pp. 39-40.

⁴⁸Busch, p. 43.

Ma never sat to any meal. She kept her back to the world and her face toward the red range, toward the cartons of matches, the row of pans and long handled forks. Sometimes she pushed the lid off the skillet and stole a bite on a long blackened prong or a sip from a wooden spoon. She refilled their plates without turning around

The deep dish skillet, as big around as a butter tub, was never off the stove and the flames were never allowed to die from under it Not a night went by but what Ma, quickly awakened in the darkness, got up to feed the fire and make sure the skillet burned.⁴⁹

Ma, then, is a parody of a person imitating an inappropriate role in the novel. These characters function not to create ambiguity, but to draw attention to the very techniques Hawkes uses to create the distorted world of the West.

At the end of the novel, however, one instance of ambiguity arises which capitalizes upon both verbal and narrative techniques. Throughout the action of the novel, a band of threatening motorcyclists have hovered around the perimeters of the town. Finally, at the very end, the sheriff, the doctor, and Luke go to fight these marauders. During the fight Luke shoots himself. Whether it is a suicide or an accident is unclear. Again, Hawkes suggests both possibilities, but offers no clues which might clarify the correct interpretation:

His eye [Luke's] crept along the hexagonal gun metal. There was no cotton in his ears, nothing to dull the slapping of air on either side as . . . the Sheriff discharged their weapons into the belly of the dam. The

⁴⁹John Hawkes, The Beetle Leg (New York: New Directions, 1951), pp. 21-22.

sweep before the truck was filled with leaves perforated and lightly touched by the swarms of buckshot. He crooked a finger on the sticky trigger. He reached out for ammunition. Then: "This is for one. And this is for another."

He could feel the eruption under his nose before he squeezed; he fell back with the mistake, the searing, double dinosaurian footfall of the twin bores (p. 158).

According to Greiner, the shotgun either explodes in his face or Luke shoots himself intentionally.⁵⁰ Busch, though, states emphatically that Luke kills himself on purpose.⁵¹ The words which help create the equivocation are "eruption," "squeezed," and "mistake." The word "squeezed" suggests intentionality, while "mistake" and even "eruption" suggest an accidental explosion. But Hawkes fails to clarify which is correct. Certainly, suicide or a violent accidental explosion would work well within Hawkes's created world. Both are brutal and senseless. Our prior knowledge of Luke's character and motivations offers no clues because Hawkes has made Luke one of his many parodies. Luke represents the proverbial Western Cowboy who drifts along with no real purpose. We cannot surmise his psychological motivations because they essentially do not exist for the Hawkesian character. Thus his stereotypic depiction does play a part in creating and sustaining this permanent ambiguity of the novel.

⁵⁰Greiner, Comic Terror, p. 118.

⁵¹Busch, p. 57.

The Goose on the Grave

In The Goose on the Grave, one of two short novels originally published in 1954 and reprinted in Lunar Landscapes in 1969, the reader experiences the same nightmarish dreamworld afforded in Charivari and The Beetle Leg. In this novel the protagonist is Adeppi, a young, orphaned child whose mother has been kidnapped and killed by three priests. He becomes a wandering urchin who affiliates himself at various times with a drunken homosexual and a soldier, a peasant woman, and the priests who kidnapped his mother. The novel follows the innocent's victimization and process of becoming jaded in post World War II Italy. Throughout the novel the effects and influences of three worlds--the military, the secular, and the monastic--are explored. The title suggests the death and decay that permeate the book: Adeppi and the peasant woman on their way to sell relics to the church pass a man who has just slaughtered a goose (p. 239), the animal which traditionally dances on a grave to ward off carrion eaters.⁵² Because this particular publication combined both The Goose on the Grave and The Owl, it received more praise than Hawkes's previous works. Most critics, however, preferred The Owl. Jerome Stone exemplified a small but growing group of supporters who "believe that his [Hawkes's] experiment is sincerely motivated will wish him well and support his resolute refusal to compromise with the

⁵²Busch, p. 80.

demand for effortless intelligibility."⁵³ However, some critics criticized The Goose on the Grave as merely being "filled with fascinating stage effects and little else,"⁵⁴ or as suffering "from a murky atmosphere, a lack of focus and coherence . . ."⁵⁵

In particular, one aspect of Hawkes's narrative technique has caused the public to brand him confusing. This technique, not ambiguity, but a withholding of information, runs through all of his early works and is most pronounced in The Goose on the Grave and The Lime Twig.⁵⁶ Unlike ambiguity where two or more distinct possible interpretations arise, this technique does not really establish any clear-cut alternatives and thus causes in the reader a lack of knowledge. And because we are creatures of habit and expect answers, we search for them even if they do not exist. In this way we superimpose alternative interpretations onto the text. Though we cannot call this effect ambiguity, in fact, the device creates an effect very close to the one ambiguity creates and thus bears consideration, especially since it is such a marked trait of his novels.

⁵³Jerome Stone, "Surrealistic Threesome," review of The Goose on the Grave; The Owl, by John Hawkes, in Saturday Review, July 24, 1954, p. 36.

⁵⁴"Two Novellas," review of The Goose on the Grave; The Owl, by John Hawkes, in Nation, July 3, 1954, p. 17.

⁵⁵The Owl, p. vi.

⁵⁶Because The Lime Twig contains no ambiguity, I will not discuss it except as a transitional novel.

In Charivari we find the roots of this technique. Here we are told that Emily is pregnant and that she does not want the baby. We are never told why she opposes the pregnancy. Hawkes nowhere suggests any possibility (other than perhaps immaturity). Because Hawkes provides no clues as to her motivations we may speculate about them--fear for an after-forty pregnancy, jealousy, or even dislike of children. We cannot make a case for any of the possibilities based on the text. In The Beetle Leg we again find this technique operating as we never really learn anything concrete about Mulge, even though he is the novel's protagonist. The only "fact" we know of Mulge is that he lies buried in the mountain. One long chapter focuses entirely on the premarriage rite prior to his and Ma's wedding. Their marriage is referred to many times, yet nowhere in the flashback does Mulge himself appear. A large gap develops and we wonder about Mulge much as many of the townspeople did in the novel.

Particularly in The Goose on the Grave we find the technique exploited. Critic Jerome Stone pointed to it in his review:

Hardly a scene will be comprehensible to the reasonable-minded reader, yet the whole thing reverberates with overtones and after-images, inexplicable, unresolved, but oddly affecting, even to those who will accuse him of pointless obscurity.⁵⁷

The first instance where Hawkes employs the device occurs at the novel's opening. Here we read of three monks riding donkeys

⁵⁷Stone, p. 36.

piously through an unidentified Italian town. Though the word "priest" immediately evokes specific connotations, Hawkes presents them through actions which do not fulfill our expectations of typical men of the cloth:

The priests on three white donkeys descended from a cloud and down the walls came into the steeper end of Castiglione's city. The beasts were for once unsure of footing and without a halt turned their white heads toward the top while little black pointed boots laced furtively into the short-haired flanks. The blackbreasts made a single file, one above the other, tightly skirted and silent, sunken into the end of a dusty journey. Chains were disarranged at their sides, the riders having been stopped far back on the road by thieves. These heavenly picadors now stuck against the white roof of the city; then turned, high as the bell tower, and without pity picked over the tiles below. Down there moved the decked-out sinners, beating across smokeless chimneys. The priests arrived from over the mountains to the toning of the morning call.⁵⁸

And immediately, they further shatter our expectations by inexplicably kidnapping a young boy's mother:

In went the priests. Striking the door, they stepped to the side of Adeppi's mother. Adeppi, sitting in the darkness with the scattered litter of his brothers and sisters crying upward from the floor, watched them cross, lift, and carry her off.

The donkeys stepped out gamely with the load slung between and again picked their way up the steep, nosing the shaggy thighs of strangers (p. 201).

Moreover, this opening sequence sets up a gap that Hawkes apparently drops for the remainder of the action. Once again he has created

⁵⁸John Hawkes, Lunar Landscapes, p. 200. All unidentified page numbers which follow refer to this edition.

a black hole of confusion. He raises questions here that he refuses to answer. Why do normally beneficent priests steal a young mother? Only at the end of the narrative does Hawkes once again pick up the thread of the kidnapped mother when we see the three monks lead an unidentified young girl into the monastery to incinerate her:

It is done. Theresa, Adeppi's mother, goes headlong into the pile, breaks through the red perishable tangle of illuminated twigs, falls to the live coals in the center to flame her stocking, bodice, and shawl. The smoke suddenly grows thick (p. 269).

This seems to be the final assault. Surely Hawkes cannot leave this action unexplained. And yet he does. He offers no explanation for this violent action. This example illustrates how Hawkes withholds information in order to parallel and reflect his view of life as a series of totally inexplicable, unrelated events. If we fail to understand his reasons for assaulting our sensibilities this way, then we fail to grasp his poetic vision. Donald J. Greiner has commented upon Hawkes's refusal to spell out motives and meanings:

Hawkes declines to drop a single hint which would reveal why she is sacrificed. The facts are there for us to read, but he refuses to spell out motives or meanings. In doing so he forces us to plunge into the imagined landscape, to participate with the characters who are denied the same information we are. For the reader who is at ease with only realistic fiction, the absence of motive or meaning is often infuriating. He finds himself struggling to put together a complete pattern, refusing to grant Hawkes the right to hold back the pieces which he must omit. Desiring traditional plotline rather than Hawkes's term--vision--the unprepared reader works so hard

to fill in "missing" information that he neglects the truly significant points. Hawkes' technique creates the effect of dream, nightmare, and fragmented history, all of which are vital to the shadowy atmosphere.⁵⁹

This technique, remember, is not ambiguity but a refusal to provide any information that might illuminate the action. Like ambiguity though, the sense of not knowing is created through a permanent gap in the narrative text. Hawkes further reinforces our sense of ignorance through characters who normally would behave in a certain way but instead act in a way that clashes with our expectations.

One clear-cut ambiguity does arise in the text in relation to Nino, a young wounded soldier who first befriends Adeppi. After Nino's wound heals, he returns to battle and after much intervening action, Hawkes introduces a section subtitled "Adeppi's Dream" in which Adeppi dreams of the suicide death of Nino:

Nino on a windy corner. Behind him a wolf, with pups still dragging at the dugs, laps the rain. A long indistinct coat falls from his throat to boots. For a moment his face contorts as if, come purposely back to a distant village, he sees what he is looking for.

Nino, the fatherless. Escaped, only to take up this post begrudgingly. At times the wind pushes him around the corner, but he reappears. He pulls at the bottom of his coat, bares one knee and a round of bandage. He glances up, then proudly points at the wound, brushing stupidly the black hair from his eyes. He cups his hands, he is calling into the darkness, the Italian autumn, the hoarse whisper through the storm in the city.

"It will not heal! It will not heal, fratello mio. . . .
(p. 235).

⁵⁹Greiner, p. 54.

The passage continues with description of Nino walking down the street, stopping at every passageway looking for a street name that he apparently never finds. He stops finally "to take shelter, expecting death" (p. 236).

Nino leans down, his lips begin to rise and deflate. The bag in one hand, the pistol in the other, he stoops further and thrusts his face along the muzzle. Then: "Peccatore, tell Edouard 'Nino sends his love!'"
He shoots (p. 236).

Hawkes then drops the line of action regarding Nino until the final scene of the novel where we learn that he is in the high mountains either asleep or dead:

At the breaking of that day, high in the mountains, Nino huddled with his head biting the crossed arms and lay close to the earth chopped from the entrenchments in the black cliff, Nino cold, bearded, and deaf to the turn of the world drifting up from the sea below. The wind touched the hair and pulled listlessly at the greatcoat upon his back, but disturbed him not as did not the howl of the sentries and the gulls. Under his hands, behind the face, deep inside the dark sac of the brain, he dreamed of them and it persisted, a continuous dream, warm and without waiting and despite the presence across the valley of the enemy (pp. 274- 75).

The dream foreshadowed Nino's death. But the description of Nino at the end reads as if he himself is sleeping or dead. Again Hawkes employs the dream structure to create the ambiguity. Both scenes have a dreamlike quality. While Hawkes titles the first "Adeppi's Dream" no internal indications suggest Adeppi is even present. Perhaps it is a literal description of the way Nino dies. On the other hand, the final scene may be only describing Nino at sleep. Hawkes's vocabulary and narrative technique deny choice.

In Hawkes's early novels, then, we find a rejection of realism. Elements such as verisimilitude and logically motivated characters do not exist. Yet within the blatant poetic style and the bizarre narrative technique, there rests a foundation of reality which provides the forward pulsation of the story element. The characters are people who live in places with which we can identify. They are plagued by problems which plague us all--war, pregnancy, death, suicide. However, Hawkes takes these characters and their problems out of the realm of the normal and through his lyric language and graphic descriptions creates a sense of distortion, confusion, and ambiguity. In some cases the sense of not knowing overrides the instances of ambiguity (as in The Beetle Leg and The Goose on the Grave). Nevertheless Hawkes's novels do offer several instances of narrative ambiguity created by distortion of the stereotypic characters, dislocation of time and place, and switches between dream and reality. As a result, the ambiguities variously function in regards to character, action (plot), and setting.

Performance Implications

The following techniques are not mutually exclusive. In fact performers can and do use many of them in combinations.

Charivari

In Charivari the ambiguities that arise all grow out of the overriding ambiguity as to whether or not the story operates within

a purely real or a fantastic setting. The solo performer probably has fewer techniques readily available than do group performers. He can preserve the ambiguity though he may not be able to feature it quite as easily. In the case of the switches between dream and reality, the solo performer does have one advantage. Because he is only one person performing in one place, he is less likely to establish highly defined space on the stage. He can stand in only one spot so that changes in time and place seemingly do not exist and thus preserve the overriding ambiguity in Charivari.

If he does choose to move from place to place to indicate changes in locale (dream versus reality) and time (past versus present), he should ensure that no properties or other visual clues establish one space solely as dream and the other solely as reality. For example, instead of using two differently-colored stools to indicate space, he would probably be better off using two identical stools. In this way he can suggest the possibilities of two different settings while still preserving the ambiguity. Further, he must take care not to employ abrupt lighting and music changes that would suggest that one space is only dream and the other only reality.

Another option available to the solo performer is a technique normally reserved for group productions, that of repeating actions. Henry's bachelor party and Emily's nightmarish examination both would lend themselves to this technique. In order to retain the two levels of reality and dream the performer as narrator might

first report these experiences as real, that is, real within the created world of the novel. Then immediately afterward, he could "stop time" and "roll back the camera" as it were and re-perform the same sequence as if Emily were dreaming. In fact, four distinct possibilities exist, all of which the interpreter could perform in succession. First, he could perform the scene much as a newspaper reporter telling only the facts. He could use direct audience eye contact and a matter-of-fact tone of voice. He could also perform this same scene as if he were the narrator, but one who disbelieves what he is describing. Thus he might read with skepticism and doubt the lines, "Below rushed the screaming chains, frothing river, and tar-dressed figures with glittering hatchets" (p. 131). And to preserve the ambiguity further, the reader might want once again to repeat it, but this time perform it from Emily's and not the narrator's perspective. He might perform it as the Emily whose own exaggerated perceptions and fears cause her to see the examination as a mechanical, brute violation of self. Or he might even perform the scene as Emily literally having a nightmare. In this instance he could perform it in a dazed and almost numb stupor. All of these possibilities are suggested by the scene, and by performing them all, the interpreter would literally reveal the various subtexts through his repeated performances. Though it may seem a strained and mechanical technique, it is one that would probably work well within Hawkes's fictional world.

In regards to the stereotypic or parodic characters the interpreter would essentially perform the character sometimes as stereotypic and sometimes as psychologically realistic. In this way the audience could never dismiss the characters as only real or only stereotypic. The interpreter, then, would not perform ambiguity per se, but perform the double perspective of the character in order to enable the audience to see other instances of ambiguity. Hawkes creates stereotypic characters as an enabling device which allows the workings of ambiguity. Granted, the performer would have to select carefully which moments he chooses to portray realistically so as not to distort the novel and confuse his audience. Again, such a technique might be strained, but would probably work well for Hawkes's vision.

The soloist might want to perform the stereotypic nature of the characters by capitalizing upon Don Geiger's technique of the behavioral synecdoche where he exaggerates one trait of the character. For instance, with Henry, the performer might want to use a property such as eyeglasses and incorporate a subtle but frequent gesture of nervously playing with them. In this way he could suggest Henry's mildness and ineffectuality. Or with Emily, the performer might elect to change posture subtly so that the characterization of Emily is physically stronger and more dominant than his portrayal of Henry.

Group performance has more techniques available to feature the ambiguity of the text. To begin with, the ambiguity of the

setting could be featured by using two identical sets supplemented by mood lighting and music. For instance, when Henry first "leaves" the party for the seashore, the performers could use a split second blackout during the narration about his catching the bus and then bring the lights up as he walks into a set physically removed from yet identical to his house. Or the group might choose to feature this element of the ambiguity by having two different sets, one representative of the Vans' house and one representative of all the other dreamworld settings. They could do this by using a realistic set for the house and only a platform for the dream sequences. However, in order not to define one space as only real and one as only dream, the same clues to suggest dream could be used for both--such as unrealistic lighting and dry ice smoke. In this way the performance suggests the different interpretations without unduly weighting either. If the group makes no use of full sets, then strongly suggestive properties and furniture might reinforce the ambiguity.

If two sets are beyond technical and economic feasibility, lighting effects could change the single set. For instance, realistic lighting could be used for the first several settings depicted in the performance. Then the next setting, whether it is dreamlike or realistic, could use the same lighting. In like manner the use of blue lighting could be employed for both dream and realistic settings in order to preserve the ambiguity.

Two different sets of performers might play Henry and Emily, performers whose appearance is similar. The one pair of performers might start out making consistent use of one set, the other pair using the other set. Eventually this rigidity would dissolve as the pairs alternately used both sets. In order to intensify the effects created with two sets of performers, the technique of segueing or overlapping lines might be employed. And at the end of the performance the two pairs of performers might approach each other and seem to fade into one another by having one pair stand behind the other as the lights fade on them.

And because Hawkes uses little dialogue, much of this effect of fused characters would come through pantomime or suggestive actions by performers during the narration. For instance, during Emily's examination, the two Emilys might be in different sets, one pantomiming having a nightmare while the other Emily pantomimes with other performers a physical examination. This technique could thus be performed as simultaneous action.

Two other techniques available to group performers are use of freezes and slow motion. These techniques could be used both with two sets of Henry's and Emily's or with only one set. In any of the sequences which are ambiguous (the girl in the black hat, the bachelor party, or the examination) the performers could act realistically, that is with no exaggeration, but in slow motion to indicate the double perspective. In like manner freezes might be

used during these same sequences where the narration continues but the performers' actions cease. Again this technique would preserve the ambiguity as to whether the action is taking place in reality or merely in the characters' minds.

The use of masks might illuminate the ambiguity of the woman in the seashore town Henry supposes is Emily. For instance, the same performer who portrays Emily might portray the mystery woman but wear a mask. Since this woman has no lines there would be no need to match voices if two different characters are used. And in the event that two different performers are used, another way of suggesting the ambiguity is to have focus on the woman by means of lights and stage composition, then have a quick spotlight flash on Emily in another place observing the woman. A simple but effective means of preserving the ambiguity would be to veil the woman's face or to have her sitting on a platform in silhouette.

The Beetle Leg

Many of the techniques discussed above can be successfully employed in a solo or group performance of the ambiguity in The Beetle Leg. The one ambiguity, the death of Luke Lampson would probably be best performed by a soloist through repeated actions. First, he could perform it as Luke and then as the narrator observing Luke. If he chooses the former, he might first perform the moment of the shooting by acting very deliberately as if he were intentionally squeezing the trigger to kill himself. Then he could repeat the

scene as if it were an accident by lunging backwards. The soloist might also choose to perform the action strictly through the eyes of the narrative point of view and use offstage focus, placing the action out in front so that the audience "sees" the event as it is related by the third-person narrator. In this way the narrative description would carry the ambiguity.

In a group performance two sets of Lukes might perform the event as suicide and an accident simultaneously using a split screen effect. If the performance uses only one Luke, probably repeated action or a freeze would best feature the two interpretations.

The Goose on the Grave

Because the only true ambiguity in this book, whether Nino is dead or asleep at the end of the novel, is in part created by Adeppi's dream which foreshadows Nino's death, any performance must therefore acknowledge the relationship between dream and reality. The solo performer might choose to perform each scene with offstage focus and use no overt movements or gestures. He might also repeat the final lines of Adeppi's dream (serving as a kind of echo) just prior to or after the final scene where we discover Nino. The group performance has the option of repeating Adeppi's dream and performing it in a low voice while the focus is on the scene describing Nino. Whatever is done, the performer of Nino must not appear unequivocally either dead or asleep. Thus low level lighting and a pose for Nino

that could suggest either would help retain the ambiguity. Further, Adeppi's dream might be performed two ways--as a nightmare with Adeppi thrashing around and then as a foreshadowing as Adeppi sleeps soundly but in another place as Nino pantomimes the action. Then at the end, Adeppi's dream would need to be repeated in close proximity to the final scene.

Summary

Undeniably, Hawkes's early works deserve the label confusing. But he also clearly creates purposeful ambiguity in Charivari, The Beetle Leg, and The Goose on the Grave through dislocation of time and place, stereotypic characters, and indirection. These devices can be preserved and in some cases featured through both solo and group performances if the performers leave intact the clues suggesting the ambiguity and if they search out creative means of performing them. Techniques such as slow motion, repeated actions, split screen effect, freezes, masks, lighting, and multiple characters all are ways of suggesting and illuminating the ambiguity. The next chapter will examine Hawkes's most recent novels for ambiguity and suggest ways performance can illuminate it.

CHAPTER VII

JOHN HAWKES: THE AMBIGUITY AND PERFORMANCE OF FOUR LATER NOVELS

Whereas Hawkes's pre-1960 novels showed little overt realism, in his most recent ones, he has apparently grown more dependent on the elements of plot, character, setting, and theme. This is not to suggest that Hawkes has in any way abandoned his previous vision or narrative techniques. Even his most recent novel, The Passion Artist, makes use of the poetic language and "painterly" construction that became the hallmarks of his early fiction. Instead, he seems to have refined his earlier techniques. As Albert J. Guerard remarked:

[Hawkes'] style naturally underwent some changes between The Cannibal of 1948 and The Lime Twig of 1961, as Hawkes became more conscious of his art and vision. The movement has been from murky, groping, brilliant, eccentric expression to deliberate rhetorical manipulation of the reader's anxieties and sympathies. Hawkes, a most gifted critic and teacher, could hardly fail to examine his own procedures. In the change there has been some loss of obsessive visionary power, but there has also been much gain. . . .

John Hawkes' . . . achievement rests on something more than startling originality of vision. It rests above all, it may be, on his power to render so much uncensored revery, so much significant and violent fantasy, so much of the pullulant underground life, with so much stylistic control.¹

¹Albert J. Guerard, "The Prose Style of John Hawkes," Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction 6 (Fall 1963): 19, 29.

Reviewer Richard Todd also remarked on the apparent change in Hawkes's fiction: "Mercifully, John Hawkes's writing has moved out of the clotted obscurity of his early novels toward a sort of clarity."² But he humorously adds: "Clarity of a sort: one doesn't want to press the point too far."³ And apparently, the prophetic decree made by Guerard years ago seems to have come true;⁴ Hawkes has indeed moved further toward realism. In Hawkes's more recent novels, we find a lessening emphasis on stereotyping characters that created ambiguity in his earlier novels. He also intermingles fantasy and reality less and, instead, seems to rely on conventional aspects of realism that he once called the enemies of fiction. His plots and characters are more accessible, and, as a result, these books have gained a wider audience.

However, his works are still not wholly realistic. Hawkes himself will admit only to "a surface realism"⁵ operating in his latest books. Donald J. Greiner who recognizes the change, nevertheless concludes that Hawkes:

²Richard Todd, "Puzzlement and Terror," The Atlantic Monthly, May 1974, p. 130.

³Todd, p. 130.

⁴John Hawkes, The Cannibal, with an Introduction by Albert J. Guerard (New York: New Directions, 1949), p. viii.

⁵Anthony C. Santore and Michael Pocalyko, eds., A John Hawkes Symposium: Design and Debris, Insights, Working Papers in Contemporary Criticism (New York: New Directions, 1977), p. 23. Hereafter referred to as Symposium.

. . . remains as unpredictable as he is experimental. His conscious goal is to disrupt the conventional forms of fiction--something we must keep in mind no matter which of his novels strikes our fancy. If he has a more specific target than traditional fictional forms, it would seem to be the unfortunate but persistent affiliation of the novel with realism. His distaste for verisimilitude and for all that a phrase like "the well-made novel" suggests is just as evident in The Blood Oranges as it is in Charivari, even though the former is "easier" to read in terms of what happens. Yet the author who hopes to break with realism must also reckon with an audience steeped in, and even demanding, conventional realistic fiction. Readers who look for a readily recognizable beginning, middle, and end, a sense of felt life, and an identification with the "good" characters are likely to be outraged, baffled, or both when a novelist refuses to meet their expectations. It is significant, then, that Hawkes' quarrel with realism is designed to free both author and reader. Violating traditional novelistic rules and reader expectations, Hawkes liberates himself to construct controlled imaginative visions, while he simultaneously delivers the reader from anticipated probability. The novel's "enemies," plot, character, setting, and theme, become secondary considerations in favor of totality of structure or "verbal and psychological coherence." The aim, insists Hawkes, is to create a world instead of to represent it. The difference is between the conventional novel with its structure based on logically developed meaning and the experimental fiction with its coherence based on imaginative vision.⁶

The Lime Twig: A Transitional Novel

The Lime Twig (1961), Hawkes's parody of a mystery thriller, marked the turning point in his career both in terms of style and acclaim. Critic J. C. Pine called this transitional book "a new

⁶Donald J. Greiner, Comic Terror: The Novels of John Hawkes (Memphis: Memphis State University Press, 1973), p. 242.

departure for this remarkable writer. On one level it is what Graham Greene likes to call an 'Entertainment,' a thriller On another level . . . it is a 20th-century journey through the infernal regions [It is a book] For all libraries that feel a responsibility to the future as well as to the passing moment."⁷ And Ray B. West in the New York Times Book Review says "It would be unfortunate if such labels [as avant-garde and surrealist] were to frighten readers away from this . . . book; . . . 'The Lime Twig' is an extremely readable novel [which] moves the reader to a genuine pathos, and sheds a glow of understanding on our times."⁸ Eric Moon calls it "one of the best novels of the last decade."⁹ And Guerard comments that The Lime Twig "shows a new power to exploit rich prose rhythms, and an even more intense use of disturbing erotic imagery."¹⁰ Generally, then, The Lime Twig, though still clearly representative of Hawkes's vision and style, is more accessible than his previous work and has garnered a wider public and greater critical acclaim.

⁷J. C. Pine, review of The Lime Twig, by John Hawkes, in Library Journal 86 (May 1, 1961): 1794.

⁸Ray B. West, Jr., "After the Blitz," review of The Lime Twig, by John Hawkes, in The New York Times Book Review, May 14, 1961, p. 31.

⁹Eric Moon, review of Lunar Landscapes, by John Hawkes, in Library Journal 94 (June 15, 1961): 2486.

¹⁰Albert J. Guerard, "John Hawkes: Geography of Terror," review of The Lime Twig, by John Hawkes, in The New York Herald Tribune Lively Arts and Book Review, June 25, 1961, p. 32.

In Hawkes's subsequent novels, Second Skin (1964), The Blood Oranges (1971), Death, Sleep & the Traveler (1974), and Travesty (1976), he apparently continues this trend toward more accessibility. We will examine each of these latter four novels in order to identify ambiguity so that we may consider its implications for performance.

Ambiguity in Four Recent Novels

The major device of ambiguity which Hawkes employs in his later novels is conscious manipulation of the narrative point of view. Especially in Second Skin, The Blood Oranges, and Travesty, do the potentially unreliable first-person narrators affect our view of the entire stories they narrate. Whereas in Hawkes's early novels we confronted either multiple points of view or a bouncing third-person omniscient point of view, here Hawkes has turned almost exclusively to the first-person narrator whose reliability is suspect.

Second Skin

Frederick Busch calls Second Skin Hawkes's "most complimented work."¹¹ Second Skin continued the trend toward a growing public tolerance of Hawkes's gothic vision and greater critical recognition of his talents. For instance, Robert M. Adams calls this book "a work of gifted maturity."¹² Susan Sontag again praises Hawkes as a

¹¹Frederick Busch, Hawkes: A Guide to his Fictions (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1973), p. 107.

¹²Robert M. Adams, "Hit and Miss," review of Second Skin, by John Hawkes, in The New York Review of Books, April 2, 1964, p. 12.

"master of an immensely artful, corrugated surface of language--a looped, virile, restless style that really is the story."¹³ She goes on to call Hawkes "an extraordinary and admirable writer, and that in 'Second Skin' he has written a beautiful book which is a worthy successor to his previous work" (p. 5).

Second Skin is considerably more accessible than Hawkes's pre-1960 works. Nevertheless, some of the same disjointedness may baffle the hasty or unsophisticated reader. Granville Hicks commented upon the continuing presense of complexity in Second Skin:

Everything Hawkes has written expresses his almost unbearable awareness of the strangeness of life, and if his work is sometimes mystifying, if he refuses to fit all the pieces of the puzzle into place, that is because he feels so strongly the disorderliness of existence.¹⁴

But Greiner quickly points out that, "For all of its apparent disjointedness, Second Skin is a highly structured work, quick to reward the reader willing to grapple with its complexity."¹⁵

One of the reasons for the supposed clarity in Hawkes's first "affirmative"¹⁶ novel results from the presence of a consistent use

¹³Susan Sontag, "A New Life for an Old One," review of Second Skin, by John Hawkes, in The New York Times Book Review, April 5, 1964, p. 5.

¹⁴Granville Hicks, "Lover in the Strangeness of Life," review of Second Skin, by John Hawkes, in Saturday Review, March 28, 1964, p. 26.

¹⁵Donald J. Greiner, "The Thematic Use of Color in John Hawkes' Second Skin," Contemporary Literature 11 (Summer 1970): 390.

¹⁶John Hawkes, "John Hawkes on His Novels: An Interview with John Graham," Massachusetts Review 7 (Summer 1966): 459.

of the first-person narrator.¹⁷ According to Robert Scholes: "Over the years, as his work has developed, he has turned more and more to the unifying voice of a single narrator as a way of giving coherence to the events of his narrative. At the same time, his fiction, which began with an emphasis on terror, violence, and death, has moved away from those horrors toward a lush eroticism, initiated in . . . Second Skin" ¹⁸

The story is the naked history of fifty-nine year old Skipper, a fat, bald, now retired naval officer living on a paradisiacal island with his concubine, Catalina Kate, and his long time friend and mess boy, Sonny. Skipper has triumphed over the suicide deaths of his father, daughter, wife, and the violent murder of his son-in-law. Written in flashback, but in present tense, the novel shows the same dislocation of time and place prominent in his earlier works. Hawkes carefully weaves together Skipper's tale. We see events as Skipper sees them and his discovery becomes ours. The story revolves around Skipper's sincere but futile attempts to prevent his daughter from committing suicide after her homosexual husband's death. Skipper, though a completely sympathetic narrator, is also somewhat suspect, as he reveals an inability to perceive people and situations as they are. This, of course, is one hazard of the first-person participant

¹⁷Greiner, Comic Terror, p. 160.

¹⁸John Hawkes, The Owl, with a Critical Interpretation by Robert Scholes (New York: New Directions, 1977), p. vi.

narrator. His account, though an honest one, is so full of self-consciousness that we look at him with suspicion. His story takes the form of a kind of apology (as he ultimately loses his daughter to suicide). We have only his word for the occurrences he describes, and he has suffered so much as a result of being a part of the death that surrounds him that he seems to have lost his ability to objectify this account. Certainly, this is a common failing of any first-person character-narrator, but Skipper seems to have gone beyond losing his objectivity.

First of all, Skipper's story is obviously biased. His overwhelming love for his daughter causes him to describe her in ways that directly contradict her actions. We hear Skipper describe her as angelic and pure, yet we see her engage in wanton promiscuity. Further, a great distance in time separates his telling from the events as they occurred. And because Skipper "is such a blunderer, so naive and unprotected, . . . we are tempted to challenge his faith in love and virtue."¹⁹ Moreover, our view of Skipper's character constantly redefines our view of his reliability as a narrator, for we have only Skipper's word for the events he describes. Several times his overproductive imagination points to the possibility of his unreliability. For example, when he describes his courageous acceptance of a tatoo, we cannot tell if he has perhaps

¹⁹Greiner, Comic Terror, p. 161.

superimposed his fantasies onto remembered reality. In this scene his daughter, Cassandra, has forced him into having the name of her murdered husband, Fernandez, tattooed on his chest:

Prolonged thorough casual rubbing with a dirty wet disintegrating cotton swab. Merely to remove some of the skin, inflame the area. Corresponding vibration in the victim's jowls and holding of breath. Dry ice effect of the alcohol. Prolonged inspection of disintegrating cardboard box of little scabrous dusty bottles, none full, some empty. Bottles of dye. Chicken blood, ground betel nut, baby-blue irises of child's eye--brief flashing of the cursed rainbow. Tossing one particular bottle up and down and grinning. Thick green. Then fondling the electric needle. Frayed cord, greasy case--like the envelope--point no more than a stiff hair but as hot as a dry frying pan white from the fire. Then he squirts at the envelope. Then lights a butt, draws, settles it on the lip of a scummy brown-stained saucer. Then unstoppers the ancient clotted bottle of iodine. Skull and crossbones. Settles the butt between his teeth where it stays. Glances at Cassandra, starts the current, comes around and sits on the corner of the table, holding the needle away from his own face and flesh, pushing a fat leg against victim's. Scowls. Leans down. Tongue in position. Rainbow full of smoke and blood. Then the needle bites.²⁰

Hawkes continues the description of Skipper's reaction to the needle as he compares Skipper's stifled scream to "a strenuous black bat struggling, wrestling in my bloated mouth" (p. 19):

. . . with my eyes squeezed tight, my lips squeezed tight, felt that at any moment it must thrust the slimy black tip of its archaic skeletal wing out into view of Cassandra and the working tattooer. But I was holding on. I longed to disgorge the bat, to sob, to be flung into the relief of freezing

²⁰John Hawkes, Second Skin (New York: New Directions, 1964), pp. 18-19.

water like an old woman submerged and screaming in the wild balm of some dark baptismal rite in a roaring river. But I was holding on. While the punctures were marching across, burning their open pinprick way across my chest, I was bulging in every muscle, slick, strained, and the bat was peering into my mouth of pain, kicking, slick with my saliva, and in the stuffed interior of my brain I was resisting, jerking in outraged helplessness, blind and baffled, sick with the sudden recall of what Tremlow had done to me that night--helpless abomination--while Sonny lay sprawled on the bridge and the captain trembled on his cot behind the pilothouse. There were tiny fat glistening tears in the corners of my eyes. But they never fell. Never from the eyes of this heavy bald-headed once-handsome man. Victim. Courageous victim (p. 19).

Is the courage he describes real or imagined? We cannot tell, but we suspect the latter.

Skipper's reliability further becomes suspect as we realize that he is the unwitting catalyst for many of the occurrences he tries so desperately to prevent. For example, his whole purpose in the recalled action is to prevent his daughter's suicide. Yet, by the end of the novel, we realize he has precipitated many of the events which lead to her eventual self-destruction--his hand in her marriage to a homosexual, his refusal to tell her of her husband's death until exactly the inappropriate moment, and his ineffectual attempts to prevent her seduction by three crass seamen.

Nevertheless, we cannot completely reject Skipper's story as totally unreliable. We want to believe Skipper because we like Skipper. In fact, by the end of the novel, we develop a respect for this man who has endured so much suffering--he is a survivor. Moreover, he so overcomes the destruction and decay around him that he

eventually becomes a giver of life on his paradisiacal island. There, he functions as an artificial inseminator of cows and each time he artificially gives life, we applaud his triumph over death.

Beyond this response to Skipper which makes us want to believe his story, we find him honest and sincere. He never means to make a mistake in his telling of his story, just as he never means to bungle the events he tries to thwart. His motives for telling the story thus seem virtuous and keep us from turning a deaf ear. Further, Skipper uses scene frequently to tell his story rather than relying totally on summary. This gives his account credibility. Such aspects of Skipper the storyteller prevent us from dismissing his story. We cannot absolutely label him as either unreliable or reliable.

Because we cannot judge him one way or the other, his apparent unreliability renders two key events ambiguous. At one point Skipper recalls an apparent homosexual assault by a fellow officer that occurred during his active service years. During a mock mutiny led by Tremlow, Skipper remembers how he (Tremlow), dressed in a grass skirt, began fighting with Skipper in order to get at the small lifeboats. He describes the fight as such:

"Tremlow," I tried to say when he socked me. He knocked down my guard with a tap of his bright fist, and vaguely I thought that it wasn't fair, that he was supposed to respect my age, respect my rank, that he was supposed to be down in the shack communicating with the rest of the fleet. Knocked down my guard and socked me in the mouth, and I should have ducked at least because the line of that blow was as clear

as hate in the steady eyes, though I still missed the idea, the plan, which was surely riding far forward by then in Tremlow's eye.

.
We went over the rail, off that wing of the bridge and down, down, with his fist wedged among my bloody teeth and the grass skirt flying, and together, locked together in his hate we burst through something--canvas, I thought, the tarp!--and landed together in a black embrace. Faint odor of dried-out bilge. Faint odor of new hemp. And of cork and lead and paint. And feeling another kind of pain, suddenly I knew that we had fallen together into the bottom of the white lifeboat--33 persons--and that we were not alone. For a moment, hearing laughter, listening to Tremlow swear, for a moment my eyes in darkness found the star-shaped hole in the tarpaulin overhead, and for that single moment I watched the gentle moon pulsing to all the limits of the great canted star cut in the canvas. I must have moaned (p. 146).

At this point Skipper continues to describe the fight as the onlookers gradually realize the situation is no longer funny. Skipper describes his desperate attempts to fight back:

. . . I flexed every possible muscle and bucked, did my best to buck, thrashed around good and plenty in the darkness with someone breathing his hot breath into my ear and the cloth ripping away from my flesh as if they were running the tip of a hot wire down the length of my thigh.
And then: "Dear God," I said, but this too was merely a quick sensation deep in the heart because the grass skirt--wet rough matting of cruel grass--was rammed against me and there was only darkness and a low steady fatigued scuffling sound in the bottom of the white lifeboat along with my last spent cry of pain (p. 147).

Afterward, Tremlow rows away in the lifeboat.

Although Hawkes never intended this action as ambiguous,²¹ the text itself leaves the exact interpretation equivocal.²² The first clue as to the ambiguity of the action comes from the title of the chapter, "The Brutal Act," in which the action occurs. This chapter, which recalls his last few days of a four-year stint on the U.S.S. Starfish, gives no other reference to a brutal act of any kind other than his encounter with Tremlow. After Tremlow makes his escape, we have the final reference to the incident as Skipper recalls: "The floating paradise, the brutal act, a few memories on a distant shore . . ." (p. 148). Could it be that here Skipper refers to the humiliation he experienced due to his inability to defend himself? The passage itself provides no clues. The title suggests the one alternative, but the passage does not support the title. We have seen how Skipper's peculiar logic affected his recollection of a tatooing. Perhaps the same exaggerated perception has distorted his memory of this incident. Moreover, he is separated by a considerable amount of time from the narrated event, and, as such, may have forgotten important details or even embellished parts of it. Thus the text suggests an equivocal interpretation but provides no clues for deciding.

²¹John Kuehl, John Hawkes and the Craft of Conflict (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1975), p. 159. In this interview with Kuehl, Hawkes says "Tremlow does rape Skipper, and Skipper is indeed saved by the Catholic chaplain."

²²See, for instance, Greiner, Comic Terror, p. 174, who says, "There are suggestions that Tremlow assaults him homosexually, but we cannot be sure."

A second ambiguity arises after Cassandra's death. In this section Skipper shows us that a woman, Miranda, presents him with the dead fetus of his daughter's baby. (Miranda implies that Skipper's daughter committed suicide because she was pregnant.)

"Well, Miranda," and I was stooping, still holding the pot, smiling up at her, "there seems to be some sort of present on the table. We don't have so many presents around here, do we?"

And then: "That one's got your name on it, Skip."

"Really?" I said. "Well, come on, Miranda, tell me. What is it?"

And slowly and keeping the big formless black eyes on mine and sucking the gray smoke back into her nostrils: "Fetus," she said, and the big mouth slid down a little as if it might smile

"What did you say, Miranda?"

"Fetus. Two-months-old fetus in a fruit jar, Skip."

"I don't understand you," I said at last, watching her, smelling the smoke, noticing that under the blouse she was naked. "I really don't know what you mean, Miranda. What kind of fetus?"

"Just a fetus, Skip. Two months old. Human."
(pp. 201-02).

Skipper, here, asks himself if it could possibly be true. He rationalizes that Miranda is cruel and this is just the kind of joke she would enjoy playing. He then attempts to confront her for the truth:

"All right Miranda," I said, still holding and weighing the jar and looking at her and seeing the mouth slide down deeper, seeing the breasts heave, "all right, Miranda. What is it?"

She waited. The cigarette was a white butt pinched between her two long fingers. Her legs were crossed. . . . And it's hers," throwing the butt on the kitchen floor where it lay burning out and smoking, "Candy's, I tell you. Why do you think she jumped, you old fool?"

. . . .

"Cassandra's?" I said then. "You mean it was Cassandra's? But surely that was no reason for Cassandra to kill herself?"

And thrusting her head at me and slowly shaking the black tangled hair and with both hands clutching her enormous white throat: "Reason or no reason," she said, "there it is. Good God!" And she was laughing, wheezing, exhaling dead smoke from the rigid lopsided square of her mouth, "Good God, I thought you'd like to have it! Sort of makes you a grandfather for the second time, doesn't it?" (p. 203).

We can never be sure if the fetus was his daughter's or if this was just one more joke the cruel Miranda played on Skipper. We know that Cassandra was promiscuous and self-destructive, even though Skipper's reported perception of her leads us to believe otherwise. We suspect, too, that she slept with more than one man during her sojourn on the island. But we also know that Miranda is cruel and enjoys antagonizing Skipper. Perhaps the fetus is no fetus at all and Miranda has played the final hand. Nor can we know if his daughter's unwanted pregnancy caused her to jump from a tower to her death, because we only have Skipper's view of Miranda reporting it. Since the incident occurs in scene rather than summary, we have no reason to disbelieve the events shown. But again we must face up to Skipper's potential unreliability that looms over every aspect of the narrative. Further, the distance in time separating him from this event is considerable, which may also point to unreliability.

The Blood Oranges

Hawkes continues his use of the first-person narrator in The Blood Oranges, and once again we face a potentially unreliable

account, that of the novel's protagonist-storyteller, Cyril. In this complex narrative, we find Cyril and Fiona, his wife, on the beautiful island of Illyria where "there are no seasons."²³ As the result of a bus accident, Cyril and Fiona meet and become friends and neighbors with Hugh and Catherine and their three daughters. The novel focuses on their story as Cyril and Fiona, two "sex singers" try to engage the other couple in extramarital affairs. While Cyril has no trouble bringing Catherine into his "tapestry" of love (p. 1), Hugh at first will not allow himself to become physically involved with Fiona, although he desperately wants to. The story begins at the end as we learn that Hugh apparently committed suicide after having become intimate with Fiona. We learn, too, of Catherine's mental collapse and Fiona's flight with Hugh and Catherine's young girls. Cyril's potential unreliability renders this complex plot ambiguous in places. Though Cyril appears above suspicion at first, as we delve deeper and deeper into his account, we see signs that he has lost his ability to see clearly the events he recalls and reports.

The public greeted this book with mixed critical reaction. Earl Ganz, who regards Hawkes as "perhaps the best living American writer,"²⁴ called The Blood Oranges "a weak novel" (p. 42):

²³John Hawkes, The Blood Oranges (New York: New Directions, 1971), p. 271.

²⁴Earl Ganz, "The Blood Oranges," Mediterranean Review 2 (Winter 1972): 42.

He seems to have tried to alleviate his so-called difficulties, seems to have listened to those critics who have asked for more directions. What he has actually done is taken the life out of his art, . . . So if you want to love John Hawkes think of his other work (p. 42).

Here Ganz objects to Hawkes's lack of poetry, and he calls the narrative voice in The Blood Oranges "pure metaphysical rhetoric" (p. 42). The poetry, Ganz says, is what has allowed Hawkes in the past to reveal his world and characters and, without the poetry, the novel suffers. However, The Times Literary Supplement calls it a "fabric of unfolding ironies, an impressively artful book"²⁵

In The Blood Oranges Cyril provides an example of a character-narrator who has developed a peculiar logic that we cannot fathom. Cyril sees himself as a "sex singer" and everything he says and does grows out of that view of himself. We find it difficult to understand why he considers adultery not a sin but, instead, the ultimate sacrifice for humanity, because we do not understand the peculiar logic which governs his way of thinking. Cyril describes his island as a warm, protected paradise. His narrative suggests he would like to persuade us and Catherine (his in-text audience) that he has found a similar paradise of peace and serenity. He sounds convincing enough at first but as we approach the end of his story we realize his paradise exists primarily in his imagination. He has distorted the

²⁵"Ironizing in Illyria," review of The Blood Oranges, by John Hawkes, in The Times Literary Supplement, October 15, 1971, p. 1247.

effects that resulted from the events that have occurred during the novel (Hugh's death, Catherine's mental collapse, and Fiona's departure). At the same time, though, we realize that Cyril has at least succeeded in persuading himself that what he says is true. He believes his declamations about sex-singing and furthermore, he expects us to believe them as well.

Some critics have complained that our suspicions of Cyril derive in part from our lack of knowledge about him.²⁶ For that matter, the text reveals little information about any of the characters' past lives. We do not know where they come from, why they are in Illyria, or how they support themselves. When asked about this omission, Hawkes commented:

I wanted to create characters in total purity and to deny myself the novelistic easiness of past lives to draw on. It's easier to sustain fiction with flashbacks, with a kind of explanatory reconstruction of past lives. All this adds more possibilities for drama, etc. I wanted none of it. I was trying to make The Blood Oranges pure for the sake of comedy, and I wanted to struggle with the characters without letting the past intrude.²⁷

This approach affects Cyril's reliability. Having no past himself, he does not bother to include past information about the people he describes. Nevertheless, even though we know nothing of Cyril's past life, he remains one of Hawkes's most complex narrators.

²⁶See Greiner, Comic Terror, pp. 226-28.

²⁷Kuehl, p. 167.

Greiner points out that Cyril is "so accomplished in sexual love and so sure of his bizarre theories that we are hard pressed to evaluate him when we finally suspect that he may not know what he is talking about. His tone may be infuriating, but his is the only account we have."²⁸ Greiner continues:

At one point he calls himself omniscient, but the irony of this claim never occurs to him. Unlike his confidence in matters of love, his narration is full of questions, fits and starts, musings. Far from omniscient, he must choose among possible motives for specific actions. His hesitancy and questioning in turn force us to challenge his reliability. Telling the story but never knowing answers, he has as much trouble with it as we do. He even wonders about the value of his tale--is it developing or is it now lifeless because love no longer favors him: "Am I embracing air? Could that be all?" (p. 228).

Greiner goes on to discuss a scene in which we see Cyril's reactions to specific actions. In the first part of the scene, Cyril, Fiona, Catherine, and Hugh are lying out on the beach. At one point Cyril decides to remove Fiona's bathing suit top. Notice Cyril's reaction to his action:

But had she wanted me to expose her breasts, I wondered, for Hugh's sake or mine? Or was the exposure purely my own idea and something that entered her consciousness and gave her pleasure only after I had touched her, untied the strings? I could not know. But I knew immediately that it was a good idea (p. 39, The Blood Oranges).

Here, Greiner points out that Cyril's own uncertainty causes us to doubt him even further:

²⁸Greiner, Comic Terror, pp. 227-28.

Should we believe him? His uncertainty is evident at the scene's conclusion when he waits for Hugh to reciprocate by unhooking Catherine's top:

Was he then thoughtless? Selfish? Without even the crudest idea of simple reciprocity? . . . What was holding him back? Could he not see that Catherine herself was puzzled, uncomfortable? Could he deliberately mean to embarrass his wife and to tamper with the obviously intended symmetry of our little scene on the beach? (pp. 42-43).

Not only is he blind to Hugh's modesty and unaware of Hugh's motives, he also assumes that Catherine's breasts must be exposed because the situation "obviously" demands symmetry.

Cyril's inability to determine the value of his narration or the motives for various actions continues throughout the novel. Time after time we are at a loss to explain why a particular scene takes shape the way it does because he is uncertain too (pp. 228-29, Greiner).

Thus Cyril's peculiar logic, so alien to our own, causes us to ask whether or not we can completely trust everything he tells us.

His unreliability is further corroborated by the fact that he mixes past and present in reporting his story. Cyril's apparent unreliability looms before us most clearly as we follow his transition from being able to second-guess his wife and friends accurately to a growing inability to monitor their thoughts. We see Cyril's insight into guessing his friends thoughts and reactions dissipate after Hugh's death. Throughout his account of the events prior to Hugh's death, Cyril's ability to second-guess is corroborated over and over by other characters. For instance, Cyril will make comments like "You're thinking of your children," and be answered with "Yes. My children" (p. 112). As he makes observations of characters, he also generally appears to be correct. As he describes Fiona's

moodiness as short-lived, in the next paragraph we see Fiona's sour mood disappear (p. 114). Cyril's apparent "omniscience" adds to the ambiguity of certain events. In one scene, where the two couples are picnicing on a nearby mountain, a shepherdess unable to speak English appears and speaks to them in her native tongue. Cyril enters her mind long enough to report her thoughts behind the words he does not understand:

She spoke in a constant uninterrupted rush of sound and gesture, assuming our comprehension of the barbaric syllables and girlish pantomime. Up went the soft arm shaded with faint hair. She shrugged in the direction of the valley. She sighed, she extended both empty hands. She smiled, held up six fingers. She smiled, shook her head, touched both breasts, clapped a small hand to her unprotected loins. But all this was unimportant, she seemed to say, because she was only a goat-girl. Whereas we, she knew, were men of mystery, women of beauty. And she recognized us, she seemed to say, though she had never expected the goats to lead her to the good luck of this encounter, which she did not intend to spend on mere self-preoccupation. Hardly (p. 144).

Notice the words "she seemed to say" and "she knew" which clue us in to the fact that he is only inferring her thoughts. Nevertheless, the image we receive is one of his knowing readily what the girl is thinking.

At times Cyril admits an inability to decipher correctly signs and thoughts, which adds to our perception of him as honest and trustworthy:

I could not make out any of Catherine's negative phrases, and decided that she was hiding her face, speaking into the pillow. But no matter, I told myself, since Catherine's declamations came readily to mind (those words and phrases of conventional denial), and since what most concerned me now, as a matter of fact, was the precise content of what Hugh was saying, the exact nature of those particular words which had borne the freight of his sexual needs for all the years of his marriage (pp. 152-53).

Frequently the text dupes us into believing the thoughts Cyril attributes to a certain character are actually the thoughts of that character. Again this clash between what we suppose to be true as reported by Cyril and what cannot be corroborated teases us. But as we examine his narrative more closely we see signs of his unreliability, stemming from his inability to see events clearly after the upheaval caused by Hugh's death. Yet we can likewise argue Cyril is reliable based on the incidents that occur early in the action. For instance, he relies heavily on scene rather than summary or description in relating events. And because Cyril's story is not separated by a great deal of distance from the time the events actually occurred, his reliability is strengthened. These series of singly directed clues create an incomplete reversal so that we can ultimately make a case for disjunctive ambiguity. Further, nearly all of these clues appear in the sections closer to the present in time. At one point Cyril reads the thoughts of Catherine after her mental collapse:

Together, side by side, slowly we retraced our steps downhill at the rear of the crowd as if I had never been the headless god nor she my mistress, but as if she and I were simply the two halves of the ancient fruit together but unjoined. The dust was rising, Catherine was pushing up the sleeves of her sweater, her very profile made me think that she was responding at last to me as well as to the white hull. Why not assume that she was beginning to value my mental landscape? Why not assume that a now invulnerable Catherine and reflective Cyril were starting over? Why not? (p. 126).

He is convinced that they will begin anew; yet at this point Catherine is barely able to speak. And the subsequent events of the story indicate they may or may not begin anew as lovers. She leaves the hospital and lives with him. They even begin to sleep together in a purely platonic fashion. The clues are so well balanced that we cannot be sure whether Cyril's account is unreliable.

Because we can never be sure of his reliability, several key events become ambiguous. For instance, we can interpret Hugh's hanging death as suicide or accident. In the scene Cyril recalls where Fiona and he discover Hugh's body, we see the two possibilities suggested:

Was this the same Hugh who had danced one night for his children and taken his pictures and smiled at Fiona and carried Catherine into Illyria and thanked me solemnly for the song of the nightingale? Could even Hugh have made this miscalculation and closed all our doors? . . . Fiona was grieving, remembering, . . .

"It's no good, baby. He's dead."

"At least it was an accident. At least he wasn't trying to kill himself . . ."

"For God's sake, I understand."

"It was bound to happen. If not now then later."

"Listen, baby, I'm going to Catherine. You can do the rest" (pp. 267-68).

The passage discloses only that Hugh died by hanging. Our normal expectations lead us to believe that any hanging must be intentional. But Cyril's comment to Fiona that, "At least it was an accident." suggests the alternative that Hugh never intended to die. Cyril reports in summary the events that transpired immediately after Hugh's death, continuing to insist that Hugh's death was accidental:

Last night we sat beneath the grapes, Catherine and I, . . . Arm over the back of my chair, glass in hand, I insisted on the accidental nature of Hugh's death, explained to Catherine that Hugh's death was an accident inspired, so to speak, by his cameras, his peasant nudes, his ingesting of the sex-song itself. It was not our shared love that had triggered Hugh's catastrophe. It was simply that his private interests, private moods, had run counter to the actualities of our foursome, so that his alien myth of privacy had established a psychic atmosphere conducive to an accident of that kind. Hugh's death hinged only on himself. And yet for that death even he was not to blame.

"Hugh was not a suicide," I murmured, "believe me."

Last night I covered that ground with all the simplicity and delicacy I could muster and shifted back to Fiona's motives in going off with the girls (p. 211).

Are these more bizarre theories of Cyril's or is he telling the truth? Greiner asserts that Cyril lied to Catherine²⁹ and thus condemns him to the realm of unreliability. And while most critics interpret Hugh's death as a suicide, ironically, Hawkes himself intended Hugh's hanging to be completely accidental--a kind of mock ritualistic sexual purgation to atone for his infidelity. In an

²⁹Greiner, Comic Terror, p. 238.

interview he mentioned that he recognized the difficulty in that passage and said he might have rewritten it as a student at the University of Iowa suggested:

The point about Hugh is that sexuality didn't matter essentially for him. Although Fiona loves him and he finally does capitulate and allow himself to be seduced by her (a kind of goddess), his first love is for his peasant nudes . . . the photographic images of those nudes. . . . At any rate, all the while Hugh is involved with Fiona, he nonetheless daily performs coupe courte. He goes through a pseudo-hanging in order to give himself the ultimate sexual release--which is described in de Sade's Justine--while he is looking at a photograph that he himself has taken. It seems to me that Hugh is the imperfect or failed artist. My point was that he was never able to escape from his solipsism despite his extraordinary love for Fiona, but one day made a mistake while practicing coupe courte. Part of the reason, part of the pleasure of pseudo-hanging is the risk of death. But Hugh didn't mean to hang himself. He was simply trying to have a superb private ejaculation. Now the reason that you can't tell from the novel is that we have only Cyril's word for it; but as my student pointed out, I could have given Hugh something like a little bench to stand on for his ritual. If that object had not been far from his feet, we would then know that he died by accident, because someone who intends to commit suicide by hanging will kick the object--the bench--far out of reach so as to be absolutely certain to die. One little detail would have changed the entire interpretation of his death.³⁰

Intentional fallacy aside, Hawkes identifies the reader's inability to "correctly" interpret Hugh's death, as we have only Cyril's word for it, a word we suspect is unreliable. Thus the text suggests the ambiguity but offers no clues to resolve it or even to support either interpretation.

³⁰Symposium, pp. 181-82. See also Kuehl, p. 169.

Another unresolved ambiguity arises as to whether or not Fiona will ever return to Illyria and Cyril. Several times Cyril insists that she will:

. . . Fiona's departure was not, like Hugh's death, a finality. With or without the children, I said, Fiona herself would one day be coming back to us. At any moment, or at some time in the distant future, Fiona would simply come looking for us [he and Catherine] through the funeral cypresses. It was not a certainty, of course, but that had been the tenor of our farewell. Nothing was fixed (pp. 211-12).

His faith, which might normally sway us to believe him, is not now strong enough because of his own doubts and because of our suspicion as to his judgment. The novel ends before Fiona's return, and we cannot be sure that she will ever return to Cyril just as we cannot be sure that Rhett returned to Scarlet.

In an interview with Hawkes, John Kuehl pointed out that the absence of a scene between Fiona and Cyril before she leaves makes her final view of him ambiguous. In reply Hawkes says:

We last see Fiona and Cyril together over Hugh's dead body, and to me her attitude toward Cyril is clear enough. Fiona is likely to return, but the ending of The Blood Oranges hinges on the idea of life starting over for Catherine and Cyril.³¹

But as we read the text, it is far from clear that Fiona will return to Cyril. Here, Hawkes establishes the two possibilities (she will or will not return) but offers no clues to resolve the ambiguity. In

³¹Kuehl, p. 168.

fact, the result is a gap in the novel, as the action ends before we discover the answer.

Travesty

Hawkes most ambiguous novel to date, Travesty, is again influenced by the potential unreliability of its narrator, Papa. In this novel, a 120-odd-page dramatic monologue, we discover (or think we discover) that Papa has somehow lured his daughter, Chantal, and friend, Henri, into a high speed car ride that he (Papa) intends to end in a violent crash killing all of them. During his ramblings we discover that Henri was lover both to Papa's wife and daughter, Chantal.

Generally, critics acclaimed Travesty as Hawkes's best novel. Albert J. Guerard, for instance, calls the Hawkes of Travesty "one of the purest masters of classical English . . . prose."³² referring to its "exquisite rhythms and formal control" (p.7). Tony Tanner calls Travesty one of Hawkes's "most remarkable fictions."³³

The book ingeniously exploits the dramatic monologue so that the reader cannot finally decide as to the reliability of the narrator. Tanner points out that:

³²Symposium, p. 4. All unidentified page numbers in this section refer to this edition.

³³Tony Tanner, review of Travesty, by John Hawkes, in The New York Times Book Review, March 28, 1976, p. 24.

. . . the book is finally disturbing, not because it is a kind of "diary of a madman" but because we cannot know how to "read" it in any one stable, reassuring way. . . . [W]e cannot "frame" it, it contains no "markers" to indicate how it is to read. That this kind of disturbance can yield mental and esthetic "pleasure" of a very high order testifies perhaps to those "faint sinister qualities of the artistic mind" that no writer knows better how to exploit than John Hawkes.³⁴

Some critics, however, regard Papa as totally mad and, hence, unreliable. Thomas LeClair, for example notes that:

The narrator heads off all questions, objections and possible interpretation of his act. . . . The serenity of his speech, the clarity of his perceptions, and the clever sophistry of his arguments give the narrator a remarkable seductiveness: ah yes, the frisson of suicide. Of course he's a madman.³⁵

Ultimately, our view of the entire novel rests with our view of Papa as reliable or unreliable. If Papa is unreliable, then we must ask if Henri and Chantal are with him; indeed, we must ask if he is in a car at all. Papa himself warns us, "The moral of it all is trust me but do not believe me--ever."³⁶ If we must trust, but not believe, how can we evaluate his story? Greiner points further to his unreliability as he says:

³⁴Tanner, p. 24.

³⁵Thomas LeClair, review of Travesty, by John Hawkes, in New Republic, May 8, 1976, p. 26.

³⁶John Hawkes, Travesty (New York: New Directions, 1976), p. 102.

For although Papa initially believes himself in control of his car, his life, and his story, he may be insane from our so-called normal point of view. Surely most of us resist the temptation to act out the fantasies of our submerged desires, but not Papa. The first clue is his remark that Henri will attempt to talk him "back to sanity" and thus dissuade him of his plan to wreck the car and kill them. Henri fails, of course, perhaps because he is not real. Numerous passages plus the absence of additional speakers support the suggestion that the other characters and perhaps even the murderously fast drive do not exist except in Papa's obsessed mind.³⁷

Perhaps, then, the experiences Papa describes are only a journey through his own mind.

Yet we cannot dismiss as nonsense his narrative because of the structuring of the novel. No lines are written as dialogue in quotation marks. His two companions never speak; for in "normal" dramatic monologues, when the speaker responds to someone, we assume that person is present whether we hear that person speak or not. We cannot be sure they are not with him, though, because Papa answers unspoken questions and reacts to supposed actions:

No, no, Henri. Hands off the wheel. Please. It is too late. After all, at one hundred and forty-nine kilometers per hour on a country road in the darkest quarter of the night, surely it is obvious that your slightest effort to wrench away the wheel will pitch us into the toneless world of highway tragedy even more quickly than I have planned. And you will not believe it, but we are still accelerating.

As for you, Chantal, you must beware. You must obey your Papa. You must sit back in your seat and fasten your belt and stop crying. And Chantal, no more beating

³⁷Symposium, p. 143.

the driver about the shoulders or shaking his arm.
Emulate Henri, my poor Chantal, and control yourself (p. 11).

. . . .
Slow down, you say? But the course of events
cannot be regulated by some sort of perversely wired
traffic policeman (p. 15).

. . . .
Do not ask me to slow down. It is impossible (p. 16).

. . . .
But Chantal, perhaps you would like to remove your
shoes. Perhaps you would like to imagine that you are
merely one of several hundred airplane passengers pre-
paring themselves to survive if possible a crash landing
(pp. 17-18).

. . . .
Very well. No radio. Music, no music, it is all
the same to me, though had the thought been agreeable
to you, I suppose I might have preferred the gentlest
background of some score prepared for melodrama (pp. 21-22).

These reactions and responses seem so real that we are unable to
decide for sure whether he is imagining the experience or not. One
of the best examples occurs when he says: "Yes, she is vomiting"
(p. 95). In so doing, he has utilized the Jamesian device of fore-
shortening to baffle and entice his readers into not knowing if
Chantal did vomit. The text leaves the final ambiguity unresolved
as the novel ends before the car crashes. Thus we never really know.
Instead, all we have is Papa's promise to his riders that "there shall
be no survivors. None" (p. 128).

The text creates the ambiguity first of all, by using a single
speaker, second, through extensive gaps in the narrative, and third,
by creating a speaker who is potentially unreliable.

Death, Sleep & the Traveler

Another recent work, Death, Sleep & the Traveler, employs the first-person narrator whose reliability is questionable. In this novel we learn that Allert has been accused, but acquitted, of the murder of his mistress, Ariane. The book itself deals only minimally with that event and instead focuses on events leading up to her death. The narrator, Allert Vanderveenan, is a Dutchman married to a woman he shares sexually with his best friend, Peter. He goes on an ocean liner voyage without her and there meets Ariane. During the course of the novel, his wife leaves him, Peter dies, and he is accused of Ariane's murder.

As before, this novel met with mixed critical response. Richard Todd, for example, called it "too narrow, gamelike,"³⁸ but Calvin Bedient called John Hawkes's sixth novel "cat-footed"³⁹ and asserted that it "makes the first five [novels] seem heavy" (p. 26). He goes on to call Death, Sleep & the Traveler "a beautiful achievement, unique and elegant in form, brilliantly judged, and likely to endure as a small classic" (p. 27).

The only ambiguity, whether or not he killed Ariane, plays only a minor part in the book, and in a sense is a moot point since he was acquitted in trial. However, it bears brief consideration just as

³⁸Todd, p. 130.

³⁹Calvin Bedient, "On Cat Feet," New Republic, April 20, 1974, p. 26.

evidence that Hawkes continues to use the potentially unreliable narrator to create ambiguity.

We have no way of judging how much distance separates Allert's telling of his tale from its happening. We suspect a great deal of distance, since he begins using the present tense as he describes his wife who is now leaving him:

She is going at last not because of what occurred on the ship or because of the trial, which has long since been swallowed into the wet coils of its own conclusion, but because I am, after all, a Hollander . . . because she does not like the Dutch.⁴⁰

From this brief passage we can discern that the murder occurred long ago. Further, this passage introduces us to the peculiar logic which governs Allert's thinking. He suffers from an inferiority-persecution complex and thus supposes all people hate him because he is Dutch.

Throughout the book, other characters question his innocence, creating the ambiguity-creating device of contradictions. We suspect Allert's guilt because of comments he occasionally makes such as "How could I possibly have done harm to such a person?" (p. 46). Such a double edged comment combined with his most intimate acquaintances' questioning his innocence cause us to suspect his guilt. Nevertheless, because the text leaves as a gap the narration of Ariane's death, we can only guess as to his guilt.

⁴⁰ John Hawkes, Death, Sleep & the Traveler (New York: New Directions, 1974), pp. 1-2.

We can see, then, that the reliability of the first-person narrator plays the largest role in creating ambiguities in Hawkes's later novels. In the books cited, ambiguities do not necessarily become the defining feature as in many of the works of Henry James. Nevertheless, these ambiguities remain a vital part of Hawkes's works. Yet nowhere do these ambiguities or unresolved gaps become mere games. In each case the withholding of information or the created ambiguity causes us to enter into the life of the novel. Hawkes has consciously or unconsciously forced his readers into the world of the work so they will experience vicariously the same feelings as the characters. Though Hawkes denies any conscious manipulation of his readers,⁴¹ he nevertheless maintains a direct control over their involvement in his novels. It is true that his books have not gained widespread popularity until of late. We can attribute this, in part, to a reader audience uneducated to the humor in violent black comedy. Hawkes's works also contain ambiguities which demand careful attention from readers and, therefore, discourage some of them.

Implications for Performance

Certainly, many of the techniques discussed in the previous chapter can apply equally well to Second Skin, The Blood Oranges, Travesty, and Death, Sleep & the Traveler. Both solo and group performers can take advantage of repeated action, slow motion, and

⁴¹Symposium, p. 25.

off stage focus to retain the ambiguities. Thus the "rape" scene in Second Skin and Hugh's death in The Blood Oranges could both be staged two ways, either simultaneously with two casts or successively with the same performers, to show the equivocal nature of each. The soloist could feature the potential unreliability of the narrator by performing the subtext of the alternating moments. At times, then, he would "play reliable" and at other moments he would "play unreliable." In this way the ambiguity would remain. Probably group performance could best illustrate the ambiguity of the first-person narrators in all four novels by using two different performers to play each. Thus one performer might play the reliable sides of Skipper, Hugh, Papa, and Allert while a second interpreter performs their unreliability. With Skipper, for instance, the group might decide to have a boy representing the naive, blundering side of Skipper's personality, while an older man portrays his presence in the here and now. This technique would reinforce the distance in time which separates Skipper's telling from its happening. The audience would never know which is the "proper" narrator.

Besides multiple casting of a single character, the group performance might also exploit the technique of split screen, simultaneous action. In The Blood Oranges, for instance, two sets of performers could simultaneously perform Hugh's death as suicide and accident, while the narrator reads the description in the background. To perform the ambiguity as to Allert's guilt, this same technique

could be used by having the performer of Allert denying his guilt while Peter and his wife repeat their lines that they doubt his innocence. The whole effect could reach a crescendo as each performer tries vocally to top the others.

Group performers may also use the freeze technique to preserve the ambiguity of this scene and the scene in which Tremlow supposedly rapes Skipper. Thus the scene depicting the action freezes (performers no longer use suggestive movements and gestures) as the narration about each of these two incidents continues.

In performing Hawkes's novel Travesty several options present themselves. First, one reader may present the novel using only one character. He may be sitting on a darkened stage in a single spotlight. In this way we do not force either alternative on the audience. They must decide for themselves if he is actually in a car with two other people or if he is alone in a solitary room thinking to himself. A very experimental group may want to stage this novel using only a speaker's voice emanating from a stage with the exterior of an empty car in the center. If they showed a demolished car they might point to one interpretation as being "correct," and of course they do not want to do this. Another way of keeping intact the basic ambiguity of the novel is to have one speaker flanked by two dummies in masks. Here again, the stylization would not negate the alternative that Papa does indeed have his friend Henri and daughter Chantal with him. Or they might stage a "group" performance of Travesty with one speaking

character flanked by two empty chairs, or with two people who have their backs to the audience and who remain motionless.

Summary

Hawkes creates ambiguity in his later books predominantly through the use of the potentially unreliable narrator. Performers must therefore seek out ways to feature that aspect of his novels, as well as preserve the individual ambiguities that operate within the books. The conclusion to this study will summarize the entire investigation and draw further conclusions as to the ways that performance can illuminate narrative ambiguity.

CONCLUSION

This study has attempted to define and describe narrative ambiguity through an examination and identification of it in selected novels of John Hawkes. After examining ambiguity, we have seen that the roots of its pejorative connotations extend as far back as Aristotle. Not until 1930 and the publication of William Empson's Seven Types of Ambiguity did literary ambiguity begin to generate praise as an artistic device.

While most studies in the past have focused primarily on semantic ambiguity, this study has sought to establish the intimate relationship between semantic and narrative ambiguity, so that we might better understand the unique workings of the narrative kind in literature. First, we discover that semantic ambiguity (or what is generally referred to as multiple meanings in words) arises only within words. Narrative ambiguity, on the other hand, grows out of the structure of the narrative form. Although ambiguity in individual words may reinforce the narrative ambiguity, it cannot alone create and sustain it. We have seen, too, that the Empsonian view of ambiguity has perpetuated a generalized definition which in effect reduces the precision of critical terminology. People today frequently identify a certain literary effect as ambiguity when, in fact, they are referring to symbolism or irony. We must realize the differences between ambiguity and these other forms of multiple

meaning. Ambiguity is one type of multiple meaning and, as a result, it functions as all such effects to compel the reader to become a creative collaborator of the work. In other words, ambiguity, as irony, symbolism, and plurisignation, all depend on reader recognition and participation to work. But ambiguity is different from these other effects in that it calls for two or more interpretations, but prevents the reader from choosing one as correct. Whereas most other multiple meaning effects conjoin at a higher level, ambiguity does not. In disjunctive ambiguity, the two interpretations mutually exclude each other, but in conjunctive ambiguity they complement each other. This study has shown that examples of conjunctive ambiguity in narrative literature are rare. Probably, conjunctive ambiguity is an effect which operates most consistently in poetry and is thus more precisely an effect limited to semantic and not narrative ambiguity. Here, we can understand the driving impulse behind Empson's book, as words in poetry have the ability to generate multiple meanings, meanings which need never conjoin to be effective. Disjunctive ambiguity, though, functions best in the narrative where interpretations arise and contradict one another.

Study of John Hawkes's novels has further shown that the ambiguity can be sustained in one of two ways. First, opposing sets of clues may each support the various interpretations as we saw in James's The Turn of the Screw. Hawkes's works have revealed that the text can suggest two or more possibilities without providing any supporting clues. We have essentially the same effect created,

as the reader still must actively participate in searching for the clues and the correct answer, although he eventually realizes no "choice" exists. In this way the function and value of ambiguity become clear; for it is by compelling but disallowing the reader to make a choice that ambiguity achieves its unique effect. Not only does it "create" the active reader, but it also affords him the same kind of experience he faces in life each and every day. Here, then, the literary and philosophical foundations of ambiguity meet.

Generally, most fields of study have ignored the examination of narrative ambiguity and have chosen to study the semantic kind. With few exceptions this has always been the case. Recently, however, the increase of interest in the narrative form in general has precipitated interest in narrative ambiguity as well. Two studies, one by Shlomith Rimmon, the other by Ralf Norrman bear this out. In oral interpretation, however, no one has investigated this phenomenon until now. For the most part, studies in this area have either ignored the study of ambiguity altogether or sought to examine only the semantic kind. Perhaps this study will provide a foundation upon which other scholars can continue investigations into narrative ambiguity and its performance.

Because ambiguity does exist in many contemporary narratives, we need to make ourselves more aware of its presence and determine how performance can illuminate that presence. Through examining studies of narrative ambiguity in selected fictions of a particular author, we have come to understand how ambiguity can be created.

Traditionally, scholars have focused on devices such as the incomplete reversal (or opposing clues which support the various interpretations), gaps (or informational omissions), and verbally created ambiguities. Through studying Hawkes, we have identified other devices for establishing ambiguity--devices such as stereotypic characters, commingling of dream and reality settings, and, most importantly, the absence of supporting clues. Further, study of Hawkes's fiction has increased our awareness of the differences between ambiguity and vagueness (or confusion), as his novels incorporate both effects. Certainly, his earlier novels (Charivari, The Beetle Leg, and The Goose on the Grave) all utilized both effects and thus contributed to the admonishments of his works as being confusing or oblique. In his later novels, Second Skin, The Blood Oranges, Travesty, and Death, Sleep & the Traveler, we see a refinement of the techniques which became the hallmarks of his style in his pre-1960 novels. After 1960, Hawkes relies more and more on first-person narrators whose reliability is suspect but not unequivocally bad. Further, we have seen Hawkes tending toward more reliance on plot, character, setting, and theme, those devices of the narrative he once claimed to reject as enemies of fiction. By examining both the concept of ambiguity and selected novels of John Hawkes to see ambiguity in the making, we have extended and redefined our total view of this artistic device. Further, we have identified specific ways in which solo and group performance can illuminate ambiguity. Above all, it is hoped that this study will make readers

more sensitive to narrative ambiguity not only in terms of its meaning, function, and value, but especially in its relationship to performance.

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John Hawkes

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Major Field: Speech

Title of Thesis: Theory and Performance of Narrative Ambiguity in Selected Novels by John Hawkes

Approved:

Mary Frances Hopkins
Major Professor and Chairman

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Date of Examination:

July 23, 1980